



HEATHER
MOLL



*A Hopeful
Holiday*

A Hopeful Holiday

A Pride and Prejudice Novella

Heather Moll



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Excessively Diverted Press

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*For my dad, who read a one-page story I wrote as a teenager and said,
“Wow, Heather. This is really good.”*

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Chapter 1

“I suppose you must not mind this cold weather, Lizzy,” Bingley said as Elizabeth was shown into the drawing room. She could hear in his voice that he was trying not to laugh while she shook the remaining snow from her cloak, and bent and flexed her fingers with a shiver.

“You ought not to have come to Netherfield on a day like this,” Jane added. “Come here, nearer to the fire.”

Elizabeth allowed her sister and brother-in-law to make a fuss over her. In truth, a brisk three-mile walk on a cold afternoon in December had been most welcome. *I have felt a real gloom over my domestic circle as of late.* She was not of a melancholy disposition, but the autumn had not passed as she had hoped, and the recent changes at Longbourn made it feel less like home.

Lydia’s marriage to Wickham, and all the circumstances surrounding that affair, had occupied her thoughts after she returned from Derbyshire. The scandalous elopement was managed by a swift marriage that had been arranged by—of all people—Fitzwilliam Darcy. Elizabeth had realised on her own that Darcy sent Bingley back to Jane, but it was her aunt’s explanations that informed her of how Darcy had found Wickham, and then bribed him to marry Lydia, paid his debts, settled money on her, and even bought the worthless man a commission.

Darcy did it all for the sake of a man and woman he could neither esteem nor respect.

In Derbyshire, while telling Darcy about Lydia’s elopement and watching his pensive manner of walking the room, Elizabeth had honestly felt that she could have loved him. Those feelings had strengthened after she learnt what he had done for Lydia. *To think I once thought him a selfish man.* After she received that letter from her Aunt Gardiner, she had hoped the gentleman himself would come to Hertfordshire, but Darcy never returned.

Not even as good a man as Darcy could overcome the natural sentiment

of abhorrence against being brother-in-law to Wickham.

Bingley returned alone, and by Michaelmas he had proposed to Jane. October was filled with wedding planning—all settlements and wedding clothes and new furniture—and in the first week of November the happy couple was at Netherfield.

Now there is nothing like kindness or enthusiasm at Longbourn with Kitty and Mary, or with my parents who have no affection for one another.

“Are you warmed now?” Bingley asked, startling Elizabeth out of her thoughts.

She smiled and tried to show a liveliness she did not feel. “I suppose you expect me to complain that I never felt such bitterness of cold before, that I am quite frozen, and wish the mild weather back with all my heart? I am perfectly well.”

“You are fit and healthy,” Bingley said. He and Jane exchanged a look she could not understand. “However, lately...”

“It is evident you have been unhappy,” Jane said softly.

Her spirits *had* been low, but it was for no reason that they could suspect. She could not very well say she might be in love with a man whom she had told outright was the last man in the world she would marry. “I do not know what you mean.”

“We are worried for you. You have been so quiet this autumn, has she not, Charles?”

“Well, if I was, autumn is nearly over,” Elizabeth answered brightly. “St Nicholas day has come and gone and it is almost Christmas.”

Bingley gave her a serious look. “Is there anything Jane or I might say or do to improve your temper?”

“I have a very happy temper!” she cried. “In fact, I came to tell you news that is cheering to me. Lady Lucas and Maria returned from visiting Charlotte and her new baby, and they brought a letter from her inviting me to stay in Kent for Christmas.”

Elizabeth put on a face of practised cheerfulness as they asked about young Master William’s and Charlotte’s health, and all the news from Kent. It would be good for her equanimity to have some pleasure to anticipate, and while there would naturally be some little vexations in Mr Collins’s attentions and the haughty, dictatorial manner of Lady Catherine, a visit to Hunsford to see her friend would be good for her spirits.

“Before I reply to Charlotte, I wanted to know if you had given any invitations for Christmas. If you plan to host your friends or family, I would not wish to be gone from Hertfordshire.”

Bingley shook his head. “The Gardiners shall come to Longbourn, of course. Caroline and Louisa have joined Hurst at his brother’s. We shall see them in town over the winter.”

Elizabeth nodded, keeping her smile fixed. *They did not invite Darcy.* It was foolish to hope that she might soon be thrown together with him. Besides, many gentlemen went to their ancestral homes at Christmas. She would eventually see Darcy through Jane and Bingley's means, but it would not happen now.

Jane came to sit near to her and asked, in a low voice, "Was there someone in particular you were hoping to see?"

She wondered how much Jane had talked to Bingley of Darcy's former attachment. "I was only curious. This is the season indeed for friendly meetings." Elizabeth put on a smile. "I wondered if you would have a house full of friends and games at Netherfield. At Christmas everybody invites their friends about them, as you see from Charlotte's letter." It was best she put Darcy out of her mind. "I shall go to Kent and see you all in 1813."

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"HOW IS THIS FAIR?" Darcy cried.

"Tis *not*," Colonel Fitzwilliam said, ripping his straw into pieces.

Lord Milton, Fitzwilliam's older brother, twirled his straw with a smile.

"We were *just* there," Fitzwilliam continued.

"You were there at Easter, eight months ago," said their father, Lord Fitzwilliam.

"It is all well for you to sit there and smile, sir," Darcy said.

His uncle held his own long straw and looked at it with a satisfied grin. "You need not be jealous of me. I shall see my sister, and hear her opinions, at every dinner and every party in town all season long."

"What about Georgiana?" Fitzwilliam asked. "She has not been to Rosings in over two years."

Georgiana sat with them at the table in Darcy's house in town. "When she came to London in June, she called on me every single day. I have seen her more recently than either of you."

"That may be true, but seeing her in London is not the same as being at Rosings for ten days."

Darcy, his two cousins, his sister, and his uncle sat around his breakfast table with their discarded straws. The annual drawing of lots took place every year to determine what pair of Fitzwilliam relations would go into Kent for Christmas. It was a matter of duty rather than affection that two of them wait on Lady Catherine for the holiday season. The group collectively agreed that no one suffer Christmas at Rosings alone.

"Perhaps I can claim that my regiment needs me..." Fitzwilliam was staring into the distance, still tearing at his short straw.

“You would leave me?” Darcy asked, incredulous.

Fitzwilliam sat back in his chair. “No. You know I would never do that to you. I just hate the company at Rosings. The evenings are so long and dull. And this time there won’t even be a pretty, satirical neighbour to enliven the scene.”

Darcy’s broken heart bled again at the memory of what happened in Hunsford parsonage.

“Who was the neighbour, and why would she not be there now?” his lordship asked.

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet was visiting the wife of Lady Catherine’s rector last spring.”

“Miss Bennet?” cried Georgiana. “I met Miss Bennet in August.”

While his cousin and sister compared their experiences with Elizabeth, Darcy thought about the last time he saw her. Crying, wishing she had told her family about Wickham, afraid Lydia would be lost forever. *The misery on her face still stays in my mind.* He had been too afraid that Elizabeth would resent him to go back to Hertfordshire when Bingley asked him to join him there last autumn.

The whole affair was due to his mistaken pride, so he did his duty to preserve Lydia’s reputation. It was owing to him—his reserve and want of proper consideration—that Wickham’s character had been so misunderstood and, consequently, that he had been received and noticed as he was.

If only Lydia had been willing to leave Wickham and return to her friends. Now, the poor girl had her reputation but was married to the most undeserving man. He doubted Elizabeth would forgive him for not speaking against Wickham when he ought to have done.

“You never mentioned seeing Miss Bennet again at Pemberley,” Fitzwilliam said to him.

“I did not think it warranted mentioning, and the visit was interrupted. I suppose”—his voice caught—“I suppose I shall encounter her at some point; Bingley married her older sister last month. He returned to Hertfordshire after he left Pemberley, and within days resumed his acquaintance with Jane Bennet.”

Fitzwilliam nodded, and then stopped, giving him a sharp look. “Resumed an earlier acquaintance with Miss Bennet’s sister?” Darcy nodded. Fitzwilliam lowered his voice. “Was Miss Bennet, the elder Miss Bennet, the one you had strong objections to?”

Darcy noticed how his uncle, sister, and other cousin were following the conversation. “Yes, she was, to my shame. I told Bingley in August how wrong I was when I...when I did what I did. He has forgiven me, and is happily married now. Why?”

Fitzwilliam shook his head slightly, conveying that he either did not wish to speak or that he had nothing to say.

“Well, my boys,” said his lordship, rising. “I wish you safe travels into Kent. I shall see you in January.” His uncle, Milton, and Georgiana then left, his sister kissing his cheek and saying how it would all be well.

Fitzwilliam threw down his mangled piece of straw onto the pile. “Back to Rosings,” he said, sighing.

“Perhaps it shall not be a punishment,” Darcy said, trying to be encouraging. “There shall be field sports. We can shoot pheasant, and Lady Catherine will host a ball on New Year’s Eve. She sometimes has other guests at this time of year, as well.”

His cousin gave him a flat look. “Will Lady Catherine still be there? Will she still force her way into every conversation? Will she still share her opinions on things about which she knows nothing? Will she still try to persuade you to marry Anne?”

“We must go, and we must make the most of it,” Darcy said as he swept the lots from the table and tossed them into the fire. “You can call on Mrs Collins or go shooting, and with the Christmas gaieties there shall be other people around for Lady Catherine to shower notice on.”

At the mention of Mrs Collins, Darcy thought of how unlikely it was that Elizabeth would visit her friend at Christmas. He sighed, staring into the fire. While they were in Derbyshire, before Lydia eloped, he had thought Elizabeth looked on him with friendship and possibly affection. Although he had preserved Lydia’s reputation, he had no reason to hope Elizabeth could love him after his silence had led to her sister’s marriage to Wickham.

“Now, Darcy, you need not look glum,” Fitzwilliam said as he rose and clapped him on the shoulder. “I did not mean to make you cast down. There is a reason no one goes to Rosings alone, you know. We shall make do as best we can, as you said. I know I was low before, but it shall all end well enough.”

Darcy forced himself into a cheerful countenance he did not feel. “You are right, of course. Perhaps we shall have a merry Christmas at Rosings after all.”

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THE IMPENDING HOLIDAY season gave Rosings more animation, although it was not enough to keep Lady Catherine in perpetually good spirits. But Darcy felt like the glossy branches of holly with bright red berries and the general cheer of the servants made Rosings Park a pleasant enough place to spend Christmas and the New Year.

But my aunt’s self-important manner and hints that I settle into domestic life with her dreary daughter are still a tax on my forbearance.

"I told Mrs Webb that she would make her husband's income go farther if she managed her domestic concerns as I advised," said Lady Catherine. "But since the Miss Webbs each have a thousand pounds settled on them, she thinks that she need not take greater care. You need not tell her that when you see her at my masquerade ball on New Year's Eve, of course. I shall tell her myself when she hosts us for dinner tomorrow on Christmas Eve."

Darcy shared a suffering look with Fitzwilliam. They had only been there three hours, and his patience was already strained.

"You must call on the parsonage," she went on. "I already told Mr Collins what to say in his Christmas service, so you shall not interrupt his sermon writing."

"Mrs Jenkinson mentioned that Mrs Collins had a son in October," Fitzwilliam said.

"Yes, he is a fine little boy. Mr Collins was good enough to send word to me when Mrs Collins was brought to bed, about eleven o'clock at night. Everything went on well. I brought the baby clothes to the parsonage myself, and they were much admired. Anne's skill with a needle is not to be rivalled."

Darcy was certain that it was Mrs Jenkinson who was applied to sew shirts, robes, and bedgowns for young Master William.

"Lady Lucas and Miss Lucas stayed six weeks," her ladyship went on. "Lady Lucas herself did not supply anything finer to the infant."

"I cannot imagine the grandmother robbed the infant of his due," said Darcy.

"There was nothing lacking in the quantity she supplied, I suppose," she said grudgingly. "I expected Mrs Collins's mother and sister would remain through Twelfth Night, but they were wanted at home and Mrs Collins seemed ready to manage her household. I told her that Mrs Jenkinson could come after her mother left, but she was not needed. In any event, Miss Bennet arrived in their place for the Christmas season."

Fitzwilliam's exclamation of happiness covered Darcy's cough of surprise as he choked on his wine. *Does Elizabeth know that I was to come down for Christmas?* She must; Lady Catherine would have boasted of it to Mr Collins.

"You must call on Mrs Collins to express your congratulations on her happy news. You may do that tomorrow, and pass along my wishes for a merry Christmas to the Collinses. I was gracious enough to invite them to dinner on Christmas but Mrs Collins said she was not yet ready to leave her infant for so long."

"I bet she is not," Fitzwilliam muttered into his wine glass, and Darcy had to hold in a laugh.

"What are you saying?" Lady Catherine called down the table.

“Darcy and I will call tomorrow, madam,” Fitzwilliam said through his restrained laughter.

“I shall invite Miss Bennet to tea on Christmas evening. The Collinses do not wish to be out late on account of the infant, but Miss Bennet would appreciate my condescension. You may pass along my invitation when you call at the parsonage.”

I shall see Elizabeth tomorrow. Would she be as friendly with him as she had been in Derbyshire before Lydia eloped? He could show her the civility, the kindness, the respect she deserved, but would it be enough to do away with the past?

“It is a pity her sister was involved in a scandalous affair,” Lady Catherine went on. “Mr Collins told me all about the infamous elopement. Such a false step in one daughter will be injurious to the fortunes of all the others; for who will connect themselves with such a family?”

“My friend Bingley married the eldest daughter two months ago,” Darcy said quickly. “And since Lydia soon married Mr Wickham, the offence is not as disastrous as you imply.”

“It only came about because of the expense laid out by her uncle and father. Still, for Miss Bennet’s sake, I hope she can find some manner of respectable husband whose connexions are not so high that they would not be disgraced by her family.”

The rest of dinner was spent by Lady Catherine loudly pronouncing what weather they were to have this Christmas season. The ladies then withdrew, and Darcy reflected on the injuries he had inflicted on Elizabeth with his selfish, ungentlemanly manners. Had he done enough in Derbyshire to show her that he had attended to her reproofs? Even if she never loved him, he hoped that, despite her sister’s marriage to Wickham, she might welcome an acquaintance with him.

Fitzwilliam rose to bring a wine bottle to the table. “I must confess something before we call at the parsonage tomorrow.” He took a deep breath. “When we were last here, I walked the park with Miss Bennet,” Fitzwilliam began, toying with his wine glass. “We were talking of this or that, and Bingley and his sisters came up, and...and I told Miss Bennet what you mentioned to me on our journey to Kent about having saved a friend from an imprudent marriage.”

Darcy realised what had been the source of Elizabeth’s information that day in April, and swore under his breath. *The end result would have been the same, naturally.*

“Of course I did not want it to get round to that lady’s family!” Fitzwilliam said, looking contrite. “I had no idea, no notion at all, until last week that Miss Bennet was the sister of the lady you so strongly objected to.”

“I know you would never have told Miss Bennet if you had known her sister was the lady in question. I am surprised, however, given what I know of her frankness, that she did not betray the truth to you.”

Fitzwilliam filled his wine glass for him. “All she said was that your conduct did not suit her feelings and who were you to judge and direct your friend. I am amazed she had such composure.”

“She did not have composure when she saw me next,” Darcy said drily.

“You spoke of it?” Darcy nodded. “At Pemberley?” He shook his head. “Here then, last April? My, my, was she not angry?”

“Oh yes. Ruining the happiness of her most beloved sister comes to mind, among other things that do not bear repeating. Although she only grew furious after I said that not only did I separate them, but that I did not regret it, and that I rejoiced in my success.”

“You said that? To her? My God, she must abhor you.”

“Yes, rather. However...” *I do not want to mention proposing and have to illuminate all the ways that I had been found wanting.* “However, I explained myself as best I could and, when we met by accident at Pemberley, she seemed to have forgiven me. I had behaved badly by her, not just in regard to her sister. I was ungentlemanly, selfish, proud...she deserves better. I know that I once thought meanly of anyone outside my circle...I can only hope—” Darcy noticed Fitzwilliam’s curious glance and realised he was rambling. “If Miss Bennet had not completely forgiven me by the time we met at Pemberley, she likely has now since I confessed what I had done to Bingley and sent him back to Jane Bennet.”

Fitzwilliam nodded. “Yes, since that lady now has the assurance that Bingley valued her all of this time, Miss Bennet cannot still be angry with you. Despite your interference, her sister married; it all ended as she could have hoped.”

At least it ended with the desired conclusion for someone.

Chapter 2

“Lady Catherine herself said he was growing at a fine rate, at least as swiftly as did Miss de Bourgh. Such a noble woman, to be attentive enough to make such an observation!” Mr Collins walked the room, holding the baby against his shoulder as he talked. “I daresay that he has already outgrown his first set of caps, and he is just two months old.”

Elizabeth shared an amused smile with Charlotte, who was looking well and happy. It was now Christmas Eve, and Elizabeth thought Charlotte’s home was cosily decorated with holly, ivy, and other evergreens. It would always be a small house, but it was well built and convenient, and there was a real air of comfort in it.

Lady Catherine had come to the parsonage once since Elizabeth arrived last week, and during that visit she had attributed Charlotte’s well-doing since the arrival of the baby to her own notice rather than to the care of Lady Lucas and Maria. And Mr Collins was equally ready to give so exact, so minute a detail of her ladyship’s attentions to him, his dear Charlotte, and the two-month-old who was falling asleep on him.

“Lady Catherine generously invited us to dine on Christmas but, naturally, it is far too soon for my dear Charlotte and I to be parted from young William. We could not possibly leave him for so many hours.” He patted the baby on the back. “However, I do not see how we can avoid her invitations for much longer and, with Charlotte’s blessing, we shall take tea with her after church the next time she asks, in order to do justice to Lady Catherine’s kind attentions.”

As Mr Collins prattled on, Elizabeth wondered if nature would give young William understanding. At the least, his mother would give him principles. *But Mr Collins will dote on him.* Although not a sensible man, he was, to her great surprise, not an indifferent father. He was affectionate and attentive and, Elizabeth supposed, in the eyes of his son, this might make up for all of Mr Collins’s natural defects of sense and education.

“Come along, young sir,” Mr Collins said as the baby yawned.

Elizabeth shared another smile with Charlotte when Mr Collins began to hum and left to walk before the windows in his own room, telling the baby of all the sights he saw of the lane and the park beyond.

“Mr Collins thinks him the finest child in all the world,” Elizabeth said. “I hope he is as equally attentive to you.”

“He brings tea for me whenever I am abed with the baby, and walks the floors if he will not settle at night. Eliza, you know that I only ever wanted a comfortable situation—I knew who I married—but I can have no complaints as to how Mr Collins cares for the child and for me.”

“I am glad to see you content, and motherhood suits you well.”

Charlotte gave a happy smile, and then asked her to recount all the details of Jane and Bingley’s wedding that had not been given their due in her letters.

“And so Longbourn must now feel strange to you, to have two sisters married and gone from home.”

“Yes, it is”—she might have said lonesome—“quiet, especially since my mother has not as much to vex her with two of her five daughters settled.”

“You have said very little of your trip to Derbyshire,” Charlotte led with an expressive smile.

Elizabeth had already learnt that Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam were due in the country for Christmas. With Mr Collins not walking to Rosings every day, perhaps only twice a week, they would not have the earliest knowledge of when Darcy was to arrive. *Perhaps I shall only see him at church tomorrow for Christmas and on Sundays.*

“I am sure I described Pemberley’s beauty accurately when I wrote to you, and of meeting Miss Darcy and seeing Bingley again, too. There was very little to say beyond that. You know how the visit ended suddenly,” she added quietly.

Charlotte gave a commiserating little nod. “It is fortunate your father and uncle even found them, and that Wickham’s circumstances were not so poor as they were originally thought to be.”

It was all because of Darcy’s generosity. She wanted him to have the credit of it, to at least tell him he had her gratitude. If Lady Catherine was not offering many invitations on account of the new baby—and on her being able to get better company at this time of year—perhaps her path would not cross with Darcy’s at all.

“Eliza, do not look so dejected. Lydia’s reputation is restored, and Jane is married. Besides, it is Christmas and—”

“Charlotte,” a loud whisper came from the front room. Quick steps brought back Mr Collins, who still spoke quietly, holding the sleeping

infant close. "The honour—such civil gentlemen—they must have only arrived yesterday!"

Both Elizabeth and Charlotte looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"We have the honour of expecting Mr Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam! They are now crossing the road."

This was enough explanation for Charlotte but this did not, however, prevent her husband from walking back to his room to report on their approach, never raising his voice above a loud whisper for fear of waking an infant who could likely sleep through a cannon blast.

"Well, Eliza. The following morning, again," Charlotte said. "Are you certain this civility is not because of you?"

She had not expected to see Darcy at this very moment. Her astonishment at his voluntarily seeking her was almost equal to what she had known on first witnessing his altered behaviour in Derbyshire. "Certainly not. They are being courteous." Her voice did not betray how much her heart fluttered at seeing Darcy again.

Charlotte raised an eyebrow. "Those men do not wait on me so soon because they are polite."

"Perhaps it is because Lady Catherine is at Rosings?"

Charlotte laughed as the door-bell rang, and Mr Collins, still carrying the baby, led Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam into the room. Here was the person to whom her whole family were indebted, and whom she knew she still regarded with tender interest the moment she laid eyes on him.

Colonel Fitzwilliam led the way once Mr Collins was done with his long-winded courtesies. Darcy paid his compliments with his usual reserve; however, his countenance was open and friendly, although he said little.

The infant attracted their attention at first, and both men were dutiful in their admiration. Colonel Fitzwilliam talked about his two nieces, and how he liked them more once they were old enough to play with and spoil. Darcy attended to the conversation, but watched Mr Collins with an expression Elizabeth could not understand. It was not a sad look, not even a critical one, for it was rare that one saw a father show an interest in his infant before company. She could not account for it.

"To think I am to see you twice in the same year," said Colonel Fitzwilliam to her when the subject of children had been exhausted. "And you have seen Darcy thrice, I understand."

"Yes, I have been that fortunate," she said, looking at Darcy as he nodded while Mr Collins prattled on to him about Lady Catherine's notice of his son.

"You must tell me your thoughts on Pemberley." Colonel

Fitzwilliam lowered his voice. "If you tell me your impressions in front of Lady Catherine, we are liable to hear many comparisons to Rosings."

She laughed with him, but felt mortified at extolling Pemberley's beauties within the hearing of the man she had spurned when he asked her to be its mistress. "Pemberley is delightful. The beauty and grandeur of it are rivalled only by the scenery itself. I think there is not a finer county in England than Derbyshire."

"But what can we say about the young men who live in Derbyshire?" Colonel Fitzwilliam asked in a teasing tone but with a significant glance toward his cousin. "I fear that I lessened your opinion of some men from that county when we last walked the park together," he added quietly.

She watched Darcy talk to Mrs Collins. The last time they had been here, he would not have talked to her friends when he could not to her. *And he would have sat silent and hardly spoken with me at all.* He was as pleasing here as he had been in Derbyshire, but she saw no sign that his regard for her was as it once had been.

"I cannot speak for Mr Darcy but, for my part, *that* is all forgot," she said kindly.

Darcy heard his name, and looked in their direction. "Are you talking of me, Fitzwilliam?"

"Miss Bennet was talking fondly of Pemberley, and how happy she is that her eldest sister is settled with your friend."

Darcy's inquiring expression turned into a more thoughtful one. "Bingley's letters are full of effusions on the subject of his marriage. He married a sensible, amiable woman, and I wish them very happy." He said this with his usual deliberation, looking only at her.

She gave him a little nod to show she understood him. He held her gaze, but they both seemed at a loss as to what to say.

"We have stayed above a quarter of an hour," Fitzwilliam said, rising. "Forgive us for taking up so much of your time."

Darcy blinked, and looked away from her, and also stood. There, the first meeting was over. She would see him at church, and then likely not—

"Mrs Collins, Lady Catherine knows you did not wish to leave your son to dine at Rosings on Christmas," Colonel Fitzwilliam said, "but she thought Miss Bennet would like to join us in the evening. If you can spare your friend, she would be very welcome."

Charlotte looked at her, desirous of knowing how she felt disposed as to that acceptance.

"I hate to leave you for an evening." With an apologetic look to both men, she said, "Please give my regrets to—"

"Cousin Elizabeth!" Mr Collins, who had been walking the room

with the baby, hurried near. "All of your scruples on leaving my dear Charlotte and me for a single evening during your visit are to your credit, but we can have no objection to your accepting Lady Catherine's offer."

"You *have* been here a week, Eliza," Charlotte said gently, "and you would be doing me a service to accept one of Lady Catherine's invitations when we have not been able to join her as often as we might like."

Her going could spare Charlotte the speedy resumption of the notice of Lady Catherine. There was no way to avoid it, and Elizabeth accepted with as much grace as she could.

"Oh, but Lady Catherine did not offer her carriage," said Charlotte to her husband, "and Eliza cannot walk in the dark."

"I could take her in the gig, but will not Lady Catherine then expect me to stay to supper? Or she might think I had presumed the invitation for myself? If she asks me, I must stay. I would not disappoint her ladyship, but I ought not to be gone for long. What if the baby cries, and you need to sleep? The nurse does not always have that proper manner with him. Lady Catherine instructed me exactly on how to walk to lull him to—"

"Perhaps her ladyship intends to send her own carriage," Colonel Fitzwilliam suggested. "I can mention it to her and I am sure she will send it." He put his gloves on and inched toward the door.

"I cannot put Lady Catherine to any further trouble!" Mr Collins argued. "It is up to people of rank to offer, not for us to put the suggestion to her. She never allows us to walk *home*, you know. She will certainly order one of her carriages to bring cousin Elizabeth back to the parsonage."

"But my dear," Charlotte said, "she cannot walk to a supper engagement at this time of year, in the dark, alone."

"And I cannot impose on Lady Catherine's kindness. You are right that to walk at night is inappropriate but, oh, what shall we do? Cousin Elizabeth cannot refuse the invitation, but what if her ladyship does not send her carriage?"

"I shall send mine," Darcy cried firmly, interrupting the senseless chatter just when Elizabeth was about to pronounce a disinclination for going at all. In a gentler voice he asked, "Miss Bennet, at what time would you have the carriage come round?"

He was not being whimsical; he did not expect her to politely refuse. "Will twenty minutes to eight suit you?"

"As you wish. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

Darcy smiled, but he said nothing more. Colonel Fitzwilliam gave a sigh of relief at having the matter settled, and parted from them with a great effort in keeping his countenance.

AFTER HAVING SPENT Christmas morning at church, and the afternoon helping Charlotte mind the baby and offer gifts of charity to those in the village, it was time to go to Rosings. Mr Collins gave her all manner of instructions on how to dress and what to say and how she should be grateful for such notice from his noble patroness on Christmas. Darcy's carriage was prompt, and at five minutes to eight she ascended the steps.

Lady Catherine's taste tended toward excessive grandeur and fine ornamentation—Rosings was nothing to Pemberley. However, Elizabeth supposed, with the addition of holly branches on every window ledge and the greenery hanging from above, that the decorations of the season softened Rosings's gaudy style.

There was a roaring Christmas fire in the drawing room when Lady Catherine received her with all of her usual condescension, and Elizabeth reminded herself to pay her all the deference that Mr Collins would want her to.

She then greeted Miss de Bourgh, who chose to nod rather than rise, curtsy, or speak. Mrs Jenkinson's civilities were scarcely any better. The greetings of Lady Catherine's nephews were friendlier: Colonel Fitzwilliam welcomed her heartily; Darcy said a quiet, "How do you do?", but offered his hand, and she readily took it. He had never before offered to shake hands with her, and her heart gave a little flutter.

Rather than think on what this gesture might mean, if anything, she said to her hostess, "I wish you a very merry Christmas, Lady Catherine."

She then tried to enter into a conversation with the gentlemen—Darcy had fixed his eye on her since she entered—but her ladyship insisted on asking her questions. Elizabeth thought her impertinent, but for Charlotte's sake she submitted to her curiosity.

After an inquisition into her travels, how was Master William sleeping, and what new clothes she had for the occasion of her trip to Kent, Lady Catherine said, "I lay my positive commands, this season of festivity being all under my control, that we shall have a merry Christmas."

Elizabeth turned to her nephews to see how they bore this injunction, and to hide her own smile. Darcy could hardly keep his countenance and Colonel Fitzwilliam walked away, shaking his head and disguising his laugh with a cough.

"As you say, madam," she said. "I suppose you shall have a great number of dinner parties during the holidays?"

"Indeed. We dined at the Webb's last evening, and we shall have

an engagement here nearly every night. The style of living in the neighbourhood is beyond the Collins's reach, otherwise I would invite them once or twice." Lady Catherine gave her an appraising look. "I suppose you might come yourself some evenings. You are a genteel kind of girl, after all."

"I thank you, but I expect to happily spend my evenings with Mrs Collins and the baby."

"No, you must come on New Year's Eve. I host a masquerade ball that is the envy of the county, and you may attend."

"I fear that I cannot walk to Rosings for so late an evening, and I will not put Mr Darcy to any further trouble."

"It is no trouble, Miss Bennet," came a deep voice behind her. She had not noticed that Darcy had approached. He now gave her a steady look that made a blush rise to her cheeks.

"Nonsense, Darcy, you should remember your coachman and horses," said Lady Catherine.

Darcy answered her with what seemed to be practised patience, but while still looking at Elizabeth. "They brought her this evening, and are perfectly able to do so again."

"Thank you," she said, wishing that this statement could encompass all the reasons she had to be grateful for him, "but I will not put you or your aunt to any inconvenience."

Lady Catherine hesitated for a moment. "No, you must attend the ball. I know what my notice and kindness can do for a young woman. There will be eligible men in attendance and should any of them take a fancy to you, you might find yourself settled near to me." Elizabeth saw Darcy's posture shift as he exhaled a shaky breath. "You may come for dinner and stay at Rosings the night of the ball, and my carriage shall take you home the day after."

"I fear I have no dress for a masquerade, or even a mask."

Colonel Fitzwilliam now came nearer. "Lady Catherine has trunks of attire; some guests come early to select from her stores. She has a fine Roman emperor garb that I plan to wear."

"If you tell her that, it ruins the surprise of a masquerade," Darcy said drolly. Elizabeth tried to imagine what manner of masquerade habit Darcy would choose that would suit his usual gravity.

"You are very welcome for my attentions, Miss Bennet," said her ladyship, who then went to Mrs Jenkinson to ask if Anne needed her fire screen moved.

Elizabeth was about to say that she had not accepted the invitation, but she supposed that it hardly mattered. Of course she must attend; Charlotte would have no peace if she refused.

"You are in high luck to meet with such attention and indulgence," teased Colonel Fitzwilliam. "You ought to be very much obliged to her

ladyship for thinking of you.”

“I am sure Mr Collins will express all of my gratitude for me.”

He smiled. “Still, Lady Catherine’s masquerade is always a large, pleasant ball. Will you dance with me?”

“I shall look forward to someone in a toga petitioning for my hand.”

“Fitzwilliam,” Lady Catherine called. “Come here. I want you.”

He gave a long-suffering look and crossed the room to move the fire screen for Miss de Bourgh, and she was left with Darcy. If not for the presence of the others, she would thank him for all he had done for her family. They looked at one another for a long moment, neither saying anything.

“Did you spend the day in mirth and festivity with the Collinses, Miss Bennet?” Darcy finally asked.

She smiled. “Young William is rather young for Hunt the Slipper or Blind Man’s Buff; it was a quiet day compared to what I am used to.”

“If you were at Longbourn, would brown beer have gone round the room while someone sang lively songs?”

“Yes, along with a Christmas pie and many friends.” She wondered what Christmas at Pemberley must be like. “Miss Darcy is not alone at Christmas, is she?”

“No, not at all. She is with my uncle in town; I shall see her in January.”

“I was surprised to learn that you were to come to Rosings when you had just been here at Easter. I thought you would be at Pemberley at this time of year.”

“I often am—I prefer it above all else, but—” He thought for a moment, and then took a step nearer. Elizabeth’s heart beat fast to have him so close. He lowered his voice and said, “I drew the short straw.”

“Oh!” She burst out in surprised laughter. “You do not mean it!”

He smiled, his own amusement better contained. “I do. Every December we gather to draw lots to see who shall attend her at Christmas. It is always two of us—none must suffer her alone—and Fitzwilliam and I drew the shortest.”

She was now laughing so hard it drew the attention of Lady Catherine, who demanded to know of what they were talking.

“Miss Bennet was talking of Mrs Collins’s little boy,” Darcy said, giving her a smile before turning round. “He is already a charming child.”

“That he may be, Miss Bennet, but I want to hear some music. The rest of us are to play snapdragon, but we do not need you.”

Darcy looked ashamed at this demand and, in fact, had opened his lips to protest, but Elizabeth shook her head. *It is not worth it to argue*

with Lady Catherine. She was able to leave; Darcy would have to suffer her for the rest of his life. "I do not mind," she said to him softly before walking to the instrument. She noticed a mistletoe bough hanging by it and wondered if Lady Catherine would force Miss de Bourgh to stand under it until Darcy passed near.

To her surprise, Darcy followed her to the pianoforte. "Shall I turn the pages?"

Elizabeth felt her heart pound. *Would Darcy be solicitous if he felt nothing for me?*

Darcy did not seem to notice the mistletoe hanging very near to them. It struck her forcibly how much she esteemed him now, how much she wanted to be esteemed in return by a man of such sense and virtue. She longed to know at that moment if, should she stand under a mistletoe bough, Darcy would pluck off a white berry and kiss her.

He was awaiting her answer; she smiled shyly at him and was nodding when Lady Catherine called his name.

"No, the family must play snapdragon at Christmas. Miss Bennet's playing may not be as well as Anne's, had she learnt, but she is a decent enough performer not to need your help."

Elizabeth felt that Darcy's eyes were repeatedly turned toward her, but between the games, her playing, and Lady Catherine's conversation, they did not speak for the rest of the evening. Their only interaction was when it was time to leave. She was in the hall awaiting his carriage when Darcy joined her. He took her cloak from the servant and put it round her shoulders, with a soft, "Merry Christmas, my dear Miss Bennet," before returning to the drawing room.

Chapter 3

The next morning there was a thin covering of snow over the fields and roofs of the houses near to Rosings but, to Darcy, it did not look like there would be any left tomorrow unless it snowed again. He and Fitzwilliam were walking back to the house in their shooting jackets and with nothing else, like a couple of bad shots.

“At least by shooting we avoided helping Lady Catherine dole out food and clothing to her tenants,” Fitzwilliam said. “It takes hours because she spends most of the time trying to scold them into harmony and plenty.”

Darcy made a noncommittal sound. He wondered if Elizabeth would welcome him if he called at the parsonage. He wanted to show her the civility he failed to show her in the past.

“Maybe when we shoot with Lord Metcalfe we shall have better luck,” his cousin said. “One good thing about Christmas at Rosings is that we have field sports and company nearly every day.”

Darcy only blew out a frustrated breath, watching the small misty cloud blow away into the cold morning. *Elizabeth might not welcome me calling again so soon, or alone.*

“You cannot be that frustrated over not having a goose for dinner,” Fitzwilliam said, now giving him a sly look. “Did you enjoy your Christmas evening?”

“I beat you at snapdragon, which is all I ever hope for at Christmas.”

What he had acknowledged to himself last night was that he still fondly loved Elizabeth. *If only she would allow me to admire her generosity, her goodness, the liveliness of her mind.* If only Elizabeth would allow him to admire *her* altogether, and love her.

Fitzwilliam nodded to himself. “You have no other hopes for the Christmas holidays? No *new* hopes now that we have come into Kent?”

Darcy threw him a look. “You are a close questioner.”

“I ask what I want to be told.”

“No, I have no hopes for the holiday.”

"I see." He paused. "I noticed that you had us call on the parsonage the morning after we arrived. Last night you shook hands with Miss Bennet. You sent your carriage for her. You went into the hall to bid her good evening."

"You ought not to chide me on my good manners. Perhaps not all hope for you is lost and you can learn from my example."

"You stare at her."

Darcy sighed. "Then, well, my manners are not as good as I had thought."

"Are you studying Miss Bennet's face to find fault?" Fitzwilliam's voice was heavy with scepticism.

He stopped walking. "What must I say to stop these questions?"

Fitzwilliam was holding back a grin. "I would be satisfied with knowing the truth about what you think of Miss Bennet."

"The truth is I respect and esteem her as much as I love her," Darcy cried, "and I love her better than anyone upon earth."

His cousin's smile now widened. "There. I have long suspected it, and now you have confirmed it. Was that so difficult?"

Darcy answered by giving his best haughty glare. It was not difficult to admit to himself or his cousin that he loved her. It was only a risk if he ever told Elizabeth.

"You are lucky that Lady Catherine cannot imagine you admiring any woman but her daughter, and does not notice your longing little gazes and attentions." Fitzwilliam drew a long breath. "I think Miss Bennet notices your admiration."

Darcy did not speak, but his heart screamed hopefully, *She does?* He had not seen enough encouragement to give him reason to hope she did nothing more than not hate him.

After they walked in silence for a while, Fitzwilliam asked, "How far does your admiration go? Longing gazes, or to the altar?"

"Well, should a man offer a second proposal to the same woman after she has told him that he is the last man in the world she could be prevailed on to marry?"

Fitzwilliam grabbed his sleeve to halt his progress. "Good God!"

"So, you see, even though we are together during this holiday, I have little reason to think she loves me."

"Yes, I do see." He nodded knowingly, and they resumed walking. "When you were last here, you were your silent, arrogant self, you separated your friend from her sister because of her low connexions, and when you overcame your scruples in your own case and offered your hand, she said that she hated you."

It was near enough to the truth, so Darcy agreed. "And at Pemberley, I showed her that I attended to her reproofs—"

"I am sure there were many."

“—and I thought her feelings for me had improved, but then Wickham and Lydia...” He shook his head. “I did not have the heart to go back to Hertfordshire with Bingley because I feared she resented me for not speaking against Wickham when I ought to have done.”

“She does not act like she resents you.” There was a thoughtful pause. “I have nothing to say against the lady herself, but how could you tolerate being brother-in-law to Wickham?”

They were near to the house, and this conversation could not take place within its walls. “A better question is do I want to be married to Miss Bennet; yes, I do,” Darcy said softly.

“I doubt that Miss Bennet knows that. Are you satisfied with only regretting her, when you might have had her hand if only you asked again?”

He could give no answer because they were about to enter the house, but the question stayed in his mind for the rest of the day. Darcy had hoped to see Elizabeth tonight, but Lady Catherine had invited company she deemed more illustrious to enliven their Saturday evening. There were mostly people of rank around the dinner table, and Darcy found himself seated by Anne, who did not speak, and Lady Metcalfe, who spoke only about herself.

In the drawing room, it did not take long for Lady Catherine to demand that he come near. As was typical of an evening at Rosings, most of the company was cowered into silence by her ladyship’s dignified impertinence.

“Darcy, Sir Jacob and Lady Marley and I were just talking of the Collinses. They do not live in a handsome style, nor are they rich, as you know.”

He was uncertain what he could contribute to such a statement, and only bowed.

“I was saying that their guest, Miss Bennet, will need my help to be married. I will see her introduced to suitable men when she stays at Rosings for my masquerade. Sir Jacob, I always give notice whenever I can, even to those who are far from being my equal. Miss Bennet will be all gratitude for my attentions.”

Sir Jacob heartily agreed, while Darcy struggled to speak. “Miss Bennet may have no need of your interf—your kind attentions.”

Lady Catherine drew back as though he had struck her. “She *will* need my help, especially because news of the patched-up business of her sister’s marriage cannot be hidden forever.”

Darcy looked at Sir Jacob and his wife, silently beseeching them to forget what they just heard. “Madam, you must not mention that affair in front of Miss Bennet.” He could not bear the thought of Elizabeth experiencing that mortification. Even her good humour and good manners might not be enough for Elizabeth to stay silent in the

face of such talk.

Lady Catherine shook her head. "She is aware of her lower place. A pity when a pretty girl's education is so neglected, Lady Marley, as you know; and Miss Bennet's connexions are low for a gentleman's daughter. Now that I have knowledge of the dreadful affair, I must see her well-settled. She shall never marry without my help, coming from such a family."

"Did you call me over to tell me of your intentions toward Miss Bennet?" Darcy asked, wishing to leave to speak with anyone else in the room.

"In a manner. You and Fitzwilliam shoot with some of the men and their holiday guests." She turned to her neighbour. "Sir Jacob, you may also suggest anyone who you think might suit, and I shall introduce them to her at the masquerade."

"I presume no one with any real property, of course?" Sir Jacob asked.

"An income, but no property," her ladyship agreed. "A clergyman maybe, or lawyer from town, an officer, some relation to a gentleman."

Darcy was not prepared for a request of this nature and said nothing as Lady Marley and Lady Catherine discussed who in the neighbourhood had money to marry on and who might tolerate a woman with connexions like Elizabeth's. It might be known in some circles that Lydia and Wickham had lived together before they married, but it was not the scandal her ladyship wished it to be. Bingley married Jane, and although the risk was greater to Darcy, it would not stop him from marrying Elizabeth if he had reason to think she would welcome his addresses.

He caught Fitzwilliam's attention on the other side of the room, and gave him a look to signal he was to rescue him.

"Darcy"—Lady Catherine forced him to turn back to face her—"I had a letter this morning that Sir Hugh de Bourgh is to come to Rosings after all. He shall be here on Tuesday and will stay a week before going to town."

"Did I hear you say that Sir Hugh is to come?" Fitzwilliam said as he came near. He exchanged a dark look with Darcy. Their conversations with Sir Lewis's nephew had been few over the last ten years, but it was not a connexion Darcy enjoyed preserving. Fitzwilliam's countenance showed he too was struggling to keep a polite face in front of Lady Catherine and her friends.

"That is correct. Sir Hugh is the present baronet, you know," Lady Catherine was saying to Sir Jacob and Lady Marley. "Sir Lewis had one brother—a rattle if ever there was one. Sir Lewis's father left him nothing, and he then had little to leave his son. At least Hugh got the

title; Sir Lewis left him nothing in his will, either.”

“What is Sir Hugh’s fortune?” asked Sir Jacob.

“He is a barrister with a legacy of five thousand pounds from his mother. Anne inherited Rosings, of course. His family saw no need to entail Rosings away from the female line.”

“Would this nephew be a suitable match for your rector’s cousin?”

“Heavens no! Sir Hugh and I often talk that matter over.” Darcy was certain who did most of the talking. “He will pay girls compliments, but he knows he must marry for money. No nephew of mine, even by marriage, would marry so poorly.”

Something in Darcy’s expression must have made his cousin decide to act. “Darcy, I think Anne wished to speak to you,” Fitzwilliam said heavily, and drew him away to stand a little distance from Anne who, of course, had expressed no interest at all in speaking to him, or anyone.

“I cannot tolerate Sir Hugh!” Fitzwilliam muttered. “He did this on purpose. He must have learnt that we would visit at the Christmas holiday and then decided to come out of spite.”

Darcy too had always disliked Anne’s cousin, but he doubted Sir Hugh’s cunning extended to that level of foresight. Sir Hugh was a man who calculated what to say that would please those who might aid him. He was a conceited coxcomb who antagonised people when he found them tiresome, who had the habit of associating with people of better income than himself and running in to debt.

“We could leave,” Fitzwilliam whispered, his face brightening. “Lady Catherine will have Sir Hugh to attend to her. He wants to secure for himself some of Lady Catherine’s property, after all. We could say urgent business calls you to town.”

In other circumstances, he would leap at the chance to cut short his visit to Rosings, abstain from a ball, and avoid Sir Hugh. *But then I might never know if Elizabeth loves me.* Hearing talk of Lady Catherine’s plan to find her a marginally respectable, lower-gentry husband pierced his heart. He had lacked the courage to pursue Elizabeth in the autumn, but now he was decided to learn if she could love him.

Darcy subtly shook his head. “It is only for a few days. Today is the twenty-sixth, and he arrives Tuesday. The ball is on Thursday, and we can leave on Saturday.”

Fitzwilliam was giving him a look of expressive wonder. “Why on earth—” Anne and Mrs Jenkinson turned their heads, and Fitzwilliam gave them a little smile and spoke more softly. “Why would you want to stay in the same house with *him* when we could—oh, Darcy.” Realisation showed on his face, and he sighed loudly.

“If I leave now, I shall have no chance of gaining her affections,” Darcy said in a low voice.

Fitzwilliam ran a hand over his face, shaking his head. "Very well. But you had better be engaged by New Year's Day if I have to suffer the presence of that smug spendthrift puppy."

Two giggling ladies then came near to ask if Fitzwilliam would turn the pages while they played a duet. The gentlemen looked at the mistletoe that was hung near to the instrument, and Darcy rolled his eyes while his cousin grinned and, with exaggerated gallantry, agreed to assist them.

If Fitzwilliam had his way there would not be a white berry on any bough left within two days. Darcy stepped away to the window, where evergreens surrounded it as well. Lady Catherine decreed the decorations would go up Christmas Eve and stay up until Twelfth Night. But he would only be in Kent until after the New Year's Eve masquerade ball. He had six days to see if he could earn Elizabeth's fondest affections.

Darcy heard laughter and turned from the window, where he saw Fitzwilliam pluck a berry from the bough with a self-satisfied smile as one of the ladies turned pink. He knew the other lady would get her turn in a short while.

Could Elizabeth ever admire me enough to want to stand underneath a mistletoe bough with me?

*

SINCE LADY CATHERINE HAD HER NEPHEWS' company, and was dining out or hosting her more distinguished neighbours, the parsonage had not received another invitation to Rosings. Elizabeth had not thought it possible, but she regretted that none had come since Christmas.

There was little hope that she would get Darcy alone to thank him for his kindness to Lydia. *And how do I tell him that he now holds a warmer place in my affections than he did when we were last in Hunsford?* As she knew too well, it was a gentleman's prerogative to speak first. She could only wonder if one gentleman in particular would ever be willing to ask her again.

"You look thoughtful, Eliza," Charlotte said as she placed young William in the cradle in the parlour.

Elizabeth tried to appear more like herself. "Not at all. Where has Mr Collins gone?"

"He walked to Rosings to call on Lady Catherine. His twice weekly calls during the day preserve us, for now, from spending long evenings at Rosings. He would rather stay at home with me and the baby than always attend to his patroness."

Elizabeth watched her friend give a fond look at the baby in the

cradle. "It gladdens me to see you so happy. Mr Collins is a surprisingly affectionate father."

Charlotte was quiet for a long moment before she said, "I think one gradually acquires knowledge of the good qualities of those who endeavour to please us. Mr Collins has become agreeable to me by degrees, and I have grown accustomed to him."

It was not the warmest commendation of marriage, but Charlotte had only wanted a good house and a sufficient income, and she had achieved that end. *I hope for respect, esteem, love, and confidence from my chosen partner.* "You show a more promising view of domestic happiness than I expected. I am ever so glad to have my presumptions proved wrong."

"I would like to see *you* happily settled, although I suspect you are more of a romantic and would prefer to be in love."

Elizabeth laughed. "You make it sound as though one cannot be in love *and* appreciate a husband's good qualities."

"Speaking of that, what think you of Mr Darcy's good qualities? Could you ever love them?" Elizabeth's smile fell from her face in surprise, but Charlotte pressed on. "I liked his manners better when he called with his cousin on Christmas Eve than how he behaved last spring. It was generous of him to offer his own carriage for you."

"Well, I...people rarely fall in love with good qualities, you know." Elizabeth hardly knew what to say. *I love Darcy full as much as one ought to love the person they wish they could spend their life with.* "Is it not usually a desire to drown oneself in unqualified, unalloyed inclination that leads to such a romance rather than a practical admiration of one's good manners?"

"I would not know," Charlotte said plainly. "But you do admire solid principles, and when joined by a handsome face and more pleasant manners..."

Elizabeth felt her cheeks grow hot. "I am sure I do not understand your hints."

"When you were last here, I had once or twice suggested the possibility of Mr Darcy being partial to you, and you always laughed at the idea." Charlotte rocked the cradle a few times, although the baby was already asleep. "You wrote of meeting him again in Derbyshire. Your eyes often wandered to Lady Catherine's pew yesterday. Unless you were looking at Colonel Fitzwilliam during the service, I would say that your opinion of Mr Darcy has improved."

"It is not proper to say any more on the subject until...until I know what, if anything, Mr Darcy feels for me."

"True, but you can judge what he feels for you by what he expresses—"

"He may be livelier than he was previously known to be, but he is

still a reserved man," Elizabeth cried.

"And you can judge also by what he does."

Charlotte certainly meant things like calling on the parsonage or sending his carriage. *What would she say of Darcy's feelings for me if she knew how he saved Lydia?* "What he does most often is look at me in silence."

"Eliza," Charlotte said while crossing the room to sit near her, "answer me honestly, and then I shall say no more about it. Do you admire him?"

"I do. He has integrity, and a good temper after all, and very good understanding. His manners are much softened since—they are better than they were before."

"And he is handsome."

They laughed, and it was a relief to Elizabeth's strained feelings. "As a young man ought to be!" she cried. As their smiles faded, she added softly, "I have no proof of his attachment to me, Charlotte, and since—" She would not speak about Darcy's proposal. "Since Lydia has married Wickham, I cannot be secure that his affections are engaged."

"It is possible that it is not a connexion he could bear," Charlotte said. "But if he comes here and is silent again, you might suppose that he feels too much and needs some encouragement, rather than presume he comes here because he is tired of Rosings."

Charlotte then yawned and looked at the sleeping baby. "He was up late last night; even between Mr Collins and the nurse, I slept little."

"You ought to nap now while you can." Charlotte looked tempted, but protested she did not want to leave her alone. "Nonsense. Go lie down on the bed. The nurse is here if he wakes and wants nothing to do with me. I need to write to my aunt, and young William can keep me company."

Elizabeth had finished the first page when she was startled by a ring at the door. When the door opened, to her surprise Darcy, and Darcy only, entered the room.

He seemed astonished too on finding her alone. "I am sorry for my intrusion. I had understood from the maid that Mrs Collins was with you."

"She only now went to rest above stairs."

They sat, and he looked around the room, and then at her, with an embarrassed expression that was unlike him. She then recollected when they had last been alone in this room, and felt all the awkwardness of what had happened then. They sat in silence, and he was likely as deep in thought as she was, but they must speak of something.

Had I not been hoping for a chance to thank him for what he did for

Lydia? “Mr Darcy, I suspect that what I must say will wound your feelings—and that you do not want my thanks—but ever since I had known of it, I wanted to thank you for your kindness to my poor sister.” He paled before her eyes. “None of my family know of it but me, but I had to tell you how grateful I am.”

“You were never...I did not want you to—” he spoke in a tone of surprise. “I did not mean for you to be made uneasy, and I certainly did not want you to learn of my involvement.”

Darcy did not want to confer an obligation on to me. Elizabeth was now certain one could fall in love with a worthy object simply by admiring their good qualities. Her heart was fit to burst. “Lydia’s thoughtlessness betrayed to me that you had been concerned in the matter; and, of course, I could not rest till I knew the particulars. You were generous, so compassionate. My family does not know what they owe to you.”

“Mr Wickham should never have been trusted in Meryton, and it was owing to my mistake that allowed your sister to love him. I wanted”—he looked down—“I also wanted you to be happy, but the whole matter is too painful a subject to be dwelt on.”

She hoped he might say that everything he had done for Lydia was to be placed to the account of his unequalled attachment to her. But they sat in silence, with her looking at the ground and him fiddling with his gloves.

Darcy finally said quietly, “It is now my turn to thank you. When we were last here, you properly humbled me. You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased. Your reproofs made a strong impression on me. I owe you a great deal of gratitude, Miss Bennet.”

She could not have been any more shocked. “I had not the smallest idea of my words being felt in such a way.”

He gave a wry smile. “I can easily believe it. You thought me devoid of every proper feeling.”

“Oh, no, I—”

“I am sure you did,” he said, giving her an earnest look. “The recollection of my conduct, my manners, my expressions during the whole of it is painful to me.”

“And I am heartily ashamed of how I spoke to you. How you must have hated me after that evening,” she whispered, feeling tears form at the back of her eyes.

Darcy shook his head. “I never, not once, resented you, or thought ill of you.”

It was good to hear this, but it was not exactly reminiscent of the passion for her he had once felt. Every idea on how to encourage his addresses seemed to fail her.

After sitting a few moments without saying a word, Darcy stood. For a sinking moment she feared he was about to take his leave, but he was only pacing the room. If she did not think of anything to keep his interest, to show she wanted him here, he would end his call.

"I suppose you would prefer to be at Pemberley with Miss Darcy at Christmas. I enjoyed meeting her very much, and I was disappointed at not furthering my acquaintance with her."

Darcy's shoulders relaxed, although he still picked up a holly branch that lay on a window ledge and twirled it between his fingers. "She delighted in your acquaintance. Perhaps if you come up to town this winter, she might have the pleasure of seeing you again."

Elizabeth resolved at that moment to write to her aunt to beg her to allow her to stay with them for a month after she left Kent. "I hope to be in Gracechurch Street in January. I suspect my aunt will insist on inviting you to dinner when I tell her that you and your sister will also be there," she added boldly.

His expression brightened, and Darcy sat back down across from her, setting aside the holly. "I should like that, and so would my sister. You are not eager, then, to return to Longbourn?"

How could she say that, with Lydia and Jane married and gone, and she in love with a man she had rejected, Longbourn hardly felt like home? Elizabeth only shrugged and asked, "Do you miss your ancestral home at this time of year? What is Pemberley like at Christmas? Is it as lively as I described Longbourn to be?"

"It was when I was young. I have fond reflections of waking up the adults with my cousins and receiving a sweet treat or a toy, playing in the snow with the estate children, and giving gifts to whomever came to the kitchen, and a feast with minced pies and roasts, and Yorkshire traditions from my mother's family."

"Does Lady Catherine not carry out the same practices at Christmas? She boasted—" Darcy smiled. "On Christmas Eve she *spoke proudly* of the Yorkshire pie she expected all of you to enjoy the next day."

Darcy hesitated. "Being at Rosings is simply not the same as being at Pemberley. I wonder if—"

There was a sound from the cradle, and Darcy stopped. Elizabeth moved near to it and rocked it a few times, humming quietly.

He came closer to peer into the cradle with the same reflective expression he had worn when he last looked at the baby. It was almost wistful. "I had not realised he was there," Darcy whispered.

"You need not be quiet; he could sleep through anything, once he finally falls asleep, that is." She rocked it one final time and rose to find herself standing very near to Darcy. She met his eye, and she felt her heart racing as his attention briefly fell from her eyes down to her

lips.

“Miss Bennet,” he began in a low, soft voice. He reached a hand toward hers, nearly touching it. “My a—”

They heard the door open and close, and Mr Collins calling out for Charlotte. Darcy stepped away and picked up his gloves, slapping them both against his palm in either frustration or impatience.

“Oh, Mr Darcy! I had not known you were here.” He gave him a low bow; Darcy inclined his head. “I have just come from Rosings where I had the pleasure of meeting Lady Catherine’s nephew by marriage, Sir Hugh de Bourgh. He must have alighted the moment you left the house. An unfortunate timing that you missed his arrival, is it not?”

“A perverse mischance,” he said.

It was plain to Elizabeth that Darcy had known this man was soon to arrive and contrived to escape him. *But did he come to avoid this Sir Hugh, or did he come because he preferred my company above anyone else’s?*

“Indeed it is, but you need not worry because after I sat with Lady Catherine and her nephews above half an hour and said that I had to return to my dear Charlotte and young son, Colonel Fitzwilliam offered to walk to the parsonage with me and—can you believe his condescension—Sir Hugh agreed to come and pay his respects to my dear Charlotte. What an honour! They are not five minutes behind me!”

Mr Collins asked about Charlotte, and he ran upstairs to wake her and apprise her of the honour she was to expect. It was apparent that Darcy did not find this news as welcome as did Mr Collins. In truth, Darcy looked downright angry. She had to brighten his manner before Colonel Fitzwilliam and this Sir Hugh entered and saw Darcy’s black expression.

“I am glad you called today. I am sorry Sir Hugh de Bourgh’s coming had to cut short our visit.” Darcy smiled at this, but said nothing else. She wondered if he might finish whatever he was about to say before they were interrupted. He seemed about to take hold of her hand, but she wondered if he now regretted it.

If he thinks me determined against him, he would not want to persecute me with what he thinks are unwanted solicitations. Darcy was too prudent, too good. How could she properly show him that her heart was engaged?

The sound of Charlotte coming down and the door-bell made her start, and she returned to her chair, Darcy returned to his sofa across from her, and they fell into silence to await the visitors.

Chapter 4

Darcy could not patiently bear this interruption to his tête-à-tête with Elizabeth. She said she was sorry to have their conversation cut short and he had the hope, while they stood near to one another and her looking at him so earnestly, that she might find him worthy of esteem, admiration, and love.

Mr and Mrs Collins then entered from one door, she with crease lines on her face and he with more chatter than was necessary; from the other the maid showed in Sir Hugh de Bourgh and Fitzwilliam. Darcy rose to greet them, settling his features in order to offer the former a complaisant smile. Sir Hugh bowed and took in the room.

He was nearly as tall as Darcy, but with a form that showed he was too much disposed for food. He was stouter than other men who were only thirty-five. *Sir Hugh may be heavy in figure, but not in eye.* He was cold, calculating, and Darcy saw that he noticed the pretty young woman who had a moment ago been sitting alone with him.

Fitzwilliam did the introductions since Mr Collins was too busy looking on his sleeping son.

“A pleasure, Miss Bennet,” Sir Hugh said as he moved to take the seat that Darcy had previously used. Darcy shrugged his shoulders and, rather than squeeze next to Sir Hugh on the sofa, moved away to sit nearer to Fitzwilliam and Mrs Collins.

“Your character precedes you,” he went on, and Elizabeth gave him a sceptical look.

“I fear for what Colonel Fitzwilliam must have told you on your walk to the parsonage,” she said, with a mock accusing glance at Fitzwilliam.

“No, no,” Sir Hugh said in his measured tone. “It was Lady Catherine.”

Darcy and Fitzwilliam shared a glance. *Surely she would not have mentioned the business of Lydia’s marriage.*

“I heard that Mr Collins’s pretty cousin is to stay at Rosings to attend the masquerade, and so I insisted that Fitzwilliam introduce me

so I could ask you for a dance now." He gestured with his chin toward Darcy. "Not all young men are as fond of dancing as I am, and I cannot tolerate a young lady, a guest of my dear aunt, to sit down at a ball."

"I accept, but how shall I know it is you if you are beneath a mask?"

Sir Hugh gave a laugh that somehow sounded both melodic and deliberate. "You shall have to accept every offer that comes your way and hope each gentleman is me."

"Perhaps you will not recognise me in my masquerade dress," she said archly. "I might dress as a man, or as a milkmaid, and you shall not know me."

Sir Hugh gave Elizabeth a significant glance that betrayed to any man of sense that he noticed her figure and would notice it no matter what she wore and no matter if her face was covered. "I suppose I must then ask every lady to dance until I am fortunate enough to partner with you."

His manner made Darcy's stomach twist in jealousy, but what could Elizabeth do but say yes to her hostess's nephew if she wanted to dance the rest of the evening? To some, he supposed, there was a good deal in Sir Hugh's air and address; and his title did him no harm. Darcy felt relieved to not see any mark of interest in her replies beyond what civility required and her own good nature.

"Darcy," Sir Hugh said, turning to look him in the eye, "I suppose you took the same house in town this season, as you have always done?"

He nodded, and Sir Hugh looked back at Elizabeth. "Such a grand house, if one likes Berkeley Square; I find it rather imposing. My own situation is humbler."

"I did not realise Brunswick Square was not to your liking," Fitzwilliam interjected.

Sir Hugh ignored him and continued to look at Elizabeth. "Where do you stay for the season? Ah, you think that you comprehend me. No, it is not an impertinent question; I would like, if you permit me, to call on you this winter to further our acquaintance."

Elizabeth gave Sir Hugh a look that Darcy recognised, as he had previously been on the receiving end of such arch looks. "My relations live in so different a part of town than even Brunswick Square. Have you, perhaps, heard of a place called Gracechurch Street?"

Sir Hugh did not so much as bat an eyelash, and Darcy suspected that this subject had already been well-canvassed at Rosings. "Indeed I have, and when you deem me worthy I would enter it happily to further our acquaintance. I could not say the same for Darcy or Fitzwilliam here. You, madam, I suspect, are not so concerned with

fortune and rank, and simply enjoy good conversation wherever it may be found.”

She politely agreed that she valued good company, and Sir Hugh then included Mrs Collins in their conversation about the hospitality of the Christmas season.

Darcy sat silent while he considered Sir Hugh’s motives in his choice of conversation. *Sir Hugh is gnawed by jealousy, the want of an address farther west, the want of a handsomer equipage than the simple gig in which he travels, the want of a fortune.* He gave Darcy the idea of one who felt his consequence with pride, and his poverty with discontent. But why did he seek Elizabeth out?

Fitzwilliam surreptitiously brought out his pocket watch to check the time, but Darcy could tell that fifteen minutes had not yet passed. They suffered more of Mr Collins’s chatter about his sleeping son and how Lady Catherine had been gracious enough to insist that the two-month-old be brought to Rosings for his first visit.

When the clock on the mantle chimed the hour, Darcy rose with Fitzwilliam, who quickly began the ceremony of leave-taking. When it was Darcy’s turn to part from Elizabeth, she offered her hand, and he took it, knowing that Sir Hugh would remark on it.

“I look forward to seeing you at Rosings on Thursday,” he said. Lady Catherine had invited Elizabeth to stay the evening of the ball. He might then have the chance to learn if he ought to offer himself, his hand, his fortune, everything, again to her acceptance.

“If Lady Catherine commands me to play again, will you turn the pages for me?”

He thought of the mistletoe that hung near to the instrument, but his answer would have been the same regardless. “With certainty.”

After the gentlemen crossed the lane to walk through the park, Fitzwilliam said to Sir Hugh, “What are you about?”

For a man so stout, Sir Hugh set a brisk pace back to Rosings. “You mention that Darcy is not at the house when I arrived because he is visiting the reverend’s cousin, who Lady Catherine says is cursed with dependency and poor connexions, and you then add that she is pretty.” He then looked at Darcy. “Fitzwilliam was right, by the bye. In any event, it should be obvious what I was doing.”

Fitzwilliam gave Darcy a confused look. “Why should he make himself agreeable to Miss Bennet when he knows she has no fortune?”

Darcy considered Sir Hugh’s nature—he was a cold being, shrewd. *And he has no love for me.* It took a few more paces before Darcy realised his motive. “You are attempting to align yourself with Miss Bennet through pleasant, friendly manners as though you have similar tastes and values, to show her that you like dancing and are at ease in Cheapside, because you think I am none of those things. You aim to

make her dislike me.”

Sir Hugh snapped his fingers and pointed at him. “I knew you would work it out. You might be dull, but you are clever.”

“That, that is—of all the cunning,” Fitzwilliam sputtered. “Good God, Sir Hugh. You talked with Miss Bennet simply to prevent Darcy from doing so? With the hope that she would think less of Darcy?” Sir Hugh nodded. “But she has not caught your fancy at all?”

He shrugged as though he had already forgotten Elizabeth entirely. “Like you, I must marry with attention to money.”

Sir Hugh was not a rival. He was not even a seducer. He was a scheming man who found Rosings tiresome and would amuse himself by thwarting Darcy’s attempts to speak with Elizabeth.

“Does honour mean nothing to you?” Darcy asked him.

“I doubt your pretty friend will get her heart broken by me.” He scoffed. “She must marry somebody of fortune too.”

Sir Hugh would sell the baronetcy—if such a thing were possible—for fifty pounds, arms and motto, name, and livery included. *He holds the de Bourgh lineage as cheap as dirt.* Honour meant nothing to him, so of course he would have no qualms with interfering with Darcy as though such a thing were his hobbyhorse.

“She must get a rich husband,” Sir Hugh went on. “Ah, young people like us that have no money are much to be pitied.”

“It is a shame that with such personal advantages as yours that you have not got a woman of fortune for yourself,” said Fitzwilliam with a sneer.

“I could wed an heiress whenever I chose it,” Sir Hugh said plainly. “You shall not nettle me by making me defensive, Fitzwilliam. I thought you might have learnt that after all of these years.”

Fitzwilliam was turning red, which must account for the smile that crossed Sir Hugh’s lips. “The question is”—he turned to Darcy—“why are *you* wasting your time?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me plainly. Why did you call on Miss Bennet? And do not tell me it was a pleasant walk to the parsonage or that you dislike being within doors. Why is rich-as-a-lord, proud Fitzwilliam Darcy sitting in that tiny parlour with those tedious people to talk with a merely tolerably pretty girl with bad connexions?”

“Her sister recently married my close friend.”

Sir Hugh cocked his head and looked at him as though Darcy were a puzzling curiosity. Darcy gave him a haughty glare, touched his hat, and outpaced him to reach the house first. If for all his shrewd observances and cold calculations Sir Hugh de Bourgh could not imagine Darcy loving Elizabeth, he was not going to elucidate.

IT HAD SNOWED AGAIN last night, and when Elizabeth awoke Thursday morning, there was a white coating as far as she could see. It brought to mind playing out-of-doors games that devolved into throwing snowballs until everyone was laughing and soaked through. *There won't be such frivolity while I am a guest at Rosings.* Today she would leave the parsonage to attend Lady Catherine's masquerade.

Elizabeth had disparate feelings about the matter. The only benefit to herself was a chance to spend time with Darcy and, of course, it helped spare Charlotte from a swift return to long evenings at Rosings. But she would have to suffer Lady Catherine's officious meddling in every action she undertook.

"You shall enjoy the masquerade tonight," Charlotte said after breakfast. "You always did love a ball and dancing until dawn." She handed Elizabeth yesterday's newspaper. "Here is what is mentioned under the county's Christmas festivities."

The Dowager Lady Catherine de Bourgh's Masquerade Ball

Takes place tomorrow at Rosings. This is expected to be a most brilliant concern. All the neighbouring nobility and gentry are invited, as well as the whole of their connexions in high life, who may be disposed to attend from any distance. None shall be admitted who are not masked. The mansion is a noble residence and all of the apartments will be decorated with coloured lamps and emblems of the season. The dancing is expected to commence at nine o'clock, the supper and unmasking at twelve, and dancing will be renewed and continue until a very late hour.

"It will be a larger affair than I originally supposed," Elizabeth said.

"I understand that Lady Catherine has masquerade dress to select from for those who do not have their own. Miss de Bourgh will have many to choose from since her mother hosts a ball every New Year's Eve. What character would you like to assume?"

She was more interested in what Darcy would wear, and if she could learn who he was before much of the night had passed. "Perhaps I shall dress as a man? It might be diverting to dance all night in trousers."

"Not if you have to dance the gentleman's part," said Charlotte, "and dance with only ladies."

"I am not certain how far Lady Catherine's love of a masquerade goes. She may draw the line at men turned to women, and vice versa."

"I think even she would not host such a ball if she then insisted on stringent rules for the masquerade dress."

"Whatever her opinion is, I am certain to hear it," Elizabeth said.

Charlotte smiled. "Now that Sir Hugh de Bourgh is also at Rosings, you shall not be wanting for other company to punctuate her ladyship's attention. He is here, I suspect, because he has hopes to be remembered in her ladyship's will."

"He is a barrister, Mr Collins said, and he inherited the baronetcy but nothing else?"

"Yes, Miss de Bourgh is the heiress of everything on the de Bourgh side, but Lady Catherine still has some of her own property to dispose of. I thought it civil of Sir Hugh to call here so soon after he arrived. It will be pleasant to have another young man in the party."

Elizabeth looked into her empty tea cup. "I am not certain that I like Sir Hugh. He could be remarked for his good address and wish of paying attention, but he seemed a cold man."

"You judge too quickly, Eliza."

"Did you not think that Sir Hugh took greater pleasure in preventing Mr Darcy from speaking with me than from speaking with me himself?"

"Perhaps you think that because you were disappointed to have your private conversation interrupted." Elizabeth felt her cheeks flush. "I can see I have embarrassed you, and I did promise to say no more about it. Just know that I think Mr Darcy is in your power, and you could have him if you help him on."

It then came time to leave, and what might have been settled in five minutes by two people as sensible as Charlotte took half an hour due to the lengthy speeches and outlandish worries of Mr Collins.

Since Elizabeth and her trunk had to go to Rosings, and Master William's first call on Lady Catherine was to take place on the same day, it made sense for Mr Collins to take them all in the gig. There was first a lengthy discussion about whether the two-wheeled cart and single horse could carry three people. It would comfortably seat two, but would cousin Elizabeth and his dear Charlotte not feel too confined by being squeezed together for an entire half a mile?

The ladies assured him many times that it was no inconvenience.

"Oh, but ought we to bring the nurse? Lady Catherine might expect the nurse to be in attendance. If he cries at home, I would, of course, walk the floors with him myself, but Lady Catherine will expect my undivided attention today. And you, my dear Charlotte, you have not been to Rosings since October and will wish to hear what Lady Catherine has to say without his cries interfering with her ladyship's counsel."

"If he cries that much, we shall simply take him home. It is only a

brief morning call.”

When this point was finally settled, Mr Collins then worried about the snow that was already melting in the afternoon sun.

“It seems that an inch, no two inches fell last night. What if we are stuck, or overturned?”

As to there being any quantity of snow fallen to impede their trek one half of a mile to Rosings, that was a mere joke. Charlotte eventually convinced him they would find no difficulty, but he seemed to still be afraid for the sake of the infant in its mother’s arms. He drove at a slow pace that Elizabeth suspected was troublesome to the horse.

When they finally stopped on the sweep, it was an hour after she had first put on her cloak and gloves. As they alighted, she saw three men walking away from them by the stable. They were handing their guns to the servants, and one of them handed over a brace of pheasant. Rather than go into the house, they suddenly began to speak animatedly.

“Cousin Elizabeth!” Mr Collins called, standing by the stairs and holding the baby.

It was Darcy and his cousins. Sir Hugh de Bourgh was the one who had shot the pheasants, but she was not sure why Colonel Fitzwilliam would look so displeased on that count. She was not near enough to hear what they were saying, but she could tell that Sir Hugh was unflappable, that the colonel was growing angrier, and Darcy was trying, in vain, to get them both to stop.

Is Sir Hugh baiting him on having had a more successful shoot? He was a capricious man, if that were the case, because a moment ago none of them sounded angry. Elizabeth pushed through the snow with the toe of her boot, testing how much there was and how wet was it. All three men looked as though they needed a distraction.

“Charlotte, do you remember having snowball fights with your siblings and mine?” she asked as she knelt down to make a ball.

“Eliza, no!” she whispered.

“Either help me end their quarrel and have a little fun, or go into the house with your husband,” she said with a laugh.

“Lady Catherine will have something to say about this if she learns of it.”

Elizabeth motioned for her to be quiet and made a second ball. She could hear Charlotte and Mr Collins talking in hushed tones by the stairs. She then carried the snowballs behind a tree a little closer to where the men were talking. They all had their backs to her, and their voices had grown louder.

“...neither of your minds were on the matter at hand,” said Sir Hugh. “You,” he said to the colonel, “need not blame me because you

cannot shoot straight.”

“It is because you would not stop talking! What sort of a gentleman finds enjoyment in interrupting another man’s sport?”

“My dear Fitzwilliam, how do you not see? It is because it is so easy to bother you that I do it!” Sir Hugh cried. “A better question is why was Darcy so out and out this morning that he cannot hit a bird ten yards away and wants to be home at so early an hour?”

“Not every action has an ulterior motive.” Darcy’s tone was full of impatience.

Elizabeth turned as Charlotte came up behind her. She gave her friend a wide smile. “I did not think you had it in you,” she whispered.

“I told Mr Collins we had a duty to show our young son how to play in the snow,” she answered, forming a snowball. “Do not tell Lady Catherine.”

She promised and then mouthed, “One, two, three!”

They both threw, and with varying degrees of success. Elizabeth missed Darcy and struck Sir Hugh instead, and Charlotte’s intended strike against Colonel Fitzwilliam scarcely grazed his arm.

“Son of a—” Sir Hugh exclaimed, stopping his oath when he saw who had struck his shoulder.

The men whirled round, their thunderous expressions turning bewildered at the sight of the two ladies leaning out from behind an oak and giggling.

Elizabeth lobbed her second snowball since Darcy had not yet been hit, and it seemed only fair he suffer the same cold fate. She struck him lightly in the chest, and the look of utter disbelief that flooded his countenance made Elizabeth laugh harder.

She said pointedly to Charlotte, “There, that is settled, so we may now call on Lady Catherine.”

The colonel and Darcy shared a look and began swiftly scooping up snow. Elizabeth tried to hide behind the tree, but Darcy hit her in the arm. She peeked out to see that Sir Hugh narrowed his eyes at them as though examining something under a microscope, shaking his head. He entered the house by way of the stable, and Charlotte ran to the stairs as a snowball struck the tree trunk.

“What! You are leaving me all alone?” Elizabeth shrieked as another snowball struck her shoulder. “I thought it might have been boys versus girls?”

Her friend shook her head and entered the house with her husband looking every bit the respectable wife of the reverend.

“Traitor,” Elizabeth muttered, bending to gather more snow. It was not deep and her fingers dragged through the grass. She threw another but Darcy dodged it and Colonel Fitzwilliam hit her in the stomach

before she could hide behind the tree.

"Do you yield, Miss Bennet?" the colonel called.

"Never!" she cried as she wondered how she might escape without becoming soaked through. After a few more rounds where she hit nothing, she ran to lower ground and behind a short row of hedges near the stable-yard. A snowball struck her back before she made it.

Perhaps I did not think this through well.

"Fine shot, Darcy!" called the colonel so she could hear. "How soon should we finish her off? Will it be a swift death, or long and painful?"

She rose to throw a snowball that missed Darcy because his own hit her on the arm and she shrank back down.

"It would be merciful to give her a quick end," she heard Darcy say. "But it seems unfair to leave her to fight against the two of us."

"No, no, she started the battle, and we now have the higher ground; she must surrender or die."

Their voices were louder, and she realised they had moved nearer. "I will never surrender!" Elizabeth decided against throwing another ball and moulded more snowballs for her arsenal.

"She is sorely unmatched; unless someone defects to her side," Darcy said slowly, "I fear she shall not last long."

"You would never!" cried the colonel.

Some quiet discussion or one made through gestures and glances must have taken place because the next thing Elizabeth knew, Colonel Fitzwilliam yelled, "Traitor!" and a volley of snowballs flew over the hedges as Darcy suddenly appeared and knelt down quickly on her side at the far end of the row.

"Well, Miss Bennet," he said, slightly out of breath, "for your sake I am now the worst sort of turncoat."

Even from ten feet away, his smile and his look struck her. It was a soft, impassioned glance, and full of tenderness considering what her mischief had brought onto him. Despite the snow, she felt a glow of warmth spread through her. She was utterly charmed by him, with his endearing grin and spots of snow across his coat. She was certain, in that moment, that she could never prefer another man over Fitzwilliam Darcy.

She felt all the eagerness of anticipation as they looked on one another. "Even if we lose the battle," she said purposely, "I feel a great happiness at having you by my side."

His eyes darkened, and Darcy tried to edge nearer to her but, when he raised up to move, a snowball knocked his hat clean off. She gave a little shriek of surprise and shrank down lower. The moment and whatever it held had passed.

"Will he show us any quarter?" she asked, resuming the game.

“And shall he ever forgive you for being a deserter and a renegade?”

“I have just turned traitor against my closest friend and a colonel in the 1st Regiment of Foot Guard,” Darcy said drily. “I think this shall end poorly for us.”

“Yes! Darcy, you shall be hanged and gibbeted!” his cousin taunted through a laugh, drawing nearer. A snowball came over the hedge and landed by Darcy’s boot. “Miss Bennet shall only be hanged.”

“I am grateful you sided with me on the battlefield,” she said to Darcy. Two more snowballs landed near to them, and Darcy rose to throw one of his own, ducking down at the last to narrowly avoid being hit. “I will endeavour to be worthy of your favour.”

“This campaign was your idea,” he said before standing to throw a snowball and bending back down quickly. “He will soon be above us, so how shall we make our last stand?”

“Give me your hat,” she whispered. He tossed it toward her, and she moved to the very end of the hedge. She gestured for him to gather up the snowballs to make ready. Elizabeth counted to three on her fingers, and raised his hat above the evergreens. She heard pounding feet as the colonel ran forward to pummel his cousin, just as Darcy rose from farther away to strike him first.

Darcy’s attack was not enough to stop the colonel from hitting the hat from her hand and landing another ball across her head with enough force to knock off her hood, and her onto the snow-covered lawn.

Elizabeth lay flat on her back as the cold snow dripped down her neck and into her mouth, but she was still smiling as she watched the good-natured snow throwing between the cousins. They were no longer forming balls of snow, but scooping up handfuls to throw at one another, laughing until their game left more grass around them than snow.

“Miss Bennet?” Colonel Fitzwilliam called after collecting himself. “Do you yield?”

“I surrender,” she said, still lying in the snow.

He stood over her, brushing snow off his sleeves and shaking his head in mock disapproval. “You have brought this upon yourself, you know?”

She nodded, wiping the water from the melted snow from her cheek. He looked about to offer his hand to help her up, but he then turned to Darcy, who was now near enough to peer over her supine form as well. Colonel Fitzwilliam exchanged a glance with his cousin and, rather than assist her, stepped back saying, “To show you that I can be benevolent in my victory, I shall have a fire built up in the parlour and something hot to drink awaiting you.”

“I am much obliged,” she answered, but he was already walking

away. Darcy held out his hands and gently pulled her to her feet.

"I have always admired your liveliness," he said softly, taking a handkerchief from his pocket, "but what possessed you to attack us?"

He reached out to wipe the snow and water from her cheek, but at the last moment he stopped and blinked, and handed it to her instead. Rather than say she would not have minded had he done it, Elizabeth hurriedly wiped her face and said, "You appeared to be quarrelling with your cousins or, rather, you and the colonel were quarrelling with Sir Hugh de Bourgh. Other than being delighted by the idea of throwing a snowball at you, I thought a distraction might be in order."

"Maybe I should leave a pail of snowballs in the larder for future quarrels with Sir Hugh," he muttered.

"I take it that Sir Hugh is not a favourite of yours?" she asked.

Darcy looked a little embarrassed. "I would by no means confess to disliking my aunt's nephew."

"I will not think you discourteous if you tell me the truth."

Darcy tried to suppress a smile and said nothing.

"I was a little surprised that you fought back," she said to change the subject. "To think I once thought you too full of self-consequence and unbending reserve for such diversions as a snowball fight." Never, even in the company of his friends at Netherfield, or his relations at Rosings last April, had she seen him so at ease. "I was wrong about you," she said quietly.

"You had formed some mistaken premises but, do you not remember what I told you? Your reproofs made a strong impression on me."

She smiled. "Is it not strange that I find you more gentlemanly for throwing snowballs at me?"

Darcy laughed and his cheeks turned pink. Before another word was said, a footman called to them from the stairs to say that Lady Catherine was awaiting Miss Bennet in the drawing room.

Chapter 5

Elizabeth could not imagine spending a fortnight or even a week at

Rosings with every day the same: go to dinner and listen to Lady Catherine, go to the drawing room and listen to Lady Catherine, over and over. Any resource for one's own amusement, a book, the instrument, one's letters, was intruded upon by her impertinent questions. Any conversation with someone other than her ladyship would eventually be interrupted, remarked upon, and quelled.

She admired Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam for coming to Rosings when they were sure of being so ill-entertained. They came out of familial duty—and perhaps a small amount of affection—and they remained civil to their aunt. Lady Catherine would tax the forbearance of any man of sense, but her two nephews bore it all admirably. If they shrugged their shoulders, it was when her back was turned; if one of them could not contain a laugh at her absurdity, it was turned into a cough while the other redirected her attention.

Sir Hugh de Bourgh has no such camaraderie with the other gentlemen, but he endures Lady Catherine without once rolling his eyes.

After the snowball fight, it seemed the gentlemen had indulged in a game of cards, at first for a penny, and then for a shilling; and through dinner were complaints from Sir Hugh that fortune had so favoured his wealthy friend Darcy that he had not a shilling left in his pockets. But not once had he shown that impatience with any of Lady Catherine's talk.

They were now all in the drawing room after a very early dinner to give them time to dress for the masquerade. Sir Hugh was at her ladyship's elbow, listening and talking with smiling attention or solicitous eagerness.

"And you ought to refrain from taking up a book or a newspaper merely because it happens to lie before you," she advised Sir Hugh. "I am convinced it induces a desultory style of reading. If I were a great reader, that is not the manner I would undertake."

"You are quite right, madam." He answered this ridiculousness

with a complaisant expression. "Speaking of that, I have often seen Darcy select whatever is laid unattended before him." He shook his head in disappointment. "He would read any volume simply because it was within reach."

"One can only tolerate this practice if one is confined to some spot with no means to select an appropriate pursuit." Her ladyship was apparently not predisposed to think poorly of the man she had chosen to marry her daughter. "I suppose the times you saw Darcy read with such idleness was only in those circumstances."

"It must be as you say, your ladyship."

To argue against Lady Catherine's opinions seemed to be against his inclinations. Sir Hugh did not appear to be the sort of man who calculated ill. *He came to Rosings to wait upon his late uncle's wife, for whom he has no affection, and suffer unpleasant company purely for the sake of trying to gain a mention in her will.*

With Sir Hugh flattering her ladyship, and Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam playing cribbage, Elizabeth was left to the company of Miss de Bourgh. Aside from her silent, sullen manner, Elizabeth could not like her. She was the sort of woman who stopped her phaeton at Charlotte's house to keep her talking out of doors, but could not trouble herself to step inside for a proper call. She constantly ordered Mrs Jenkinson's attendance for things she was perfectly capable of doing herself.

Miss de Bourgh's manner is different, but she is as selfish as her mother.

Still, Elizabeth addressed her with the utmost politeness. "Are you eagerly anticipating the masked ball?" she asked while sitting down near to her.

Miss de Bourgh shrugged, and then leaned toward her companion, saying something in a low voice.

"You are blocking the fire, madam," said Mrs Jenkinson to her. "Would you please move your seat?"

Elizabeth looked at the screen, angled toward Miss de Bourgh, and her own seat on one end of the sofa. It was impossible that she was inconveniencing her, but she smiled and moved to the other end of the sofa.

"Have you chosen your masquerade dress, Miss de Bourgh?" She only shook her head, but Elizabeth persevered. "I suppose since the ball is an annual one, you have seen a great many styles of dress. Do you typically wear the same or do you select a different one every year?"

"My mother will select for me," she said without any hint of her opinion on that matter. She then shifted her body to better face the fire.

Miss de Bourgh is not inclined to return my civilities with the same politeness. Hoping for better luck with her companion, she asked, "Have you chosen your masquerade habit, Mrs Jenkinson?"

That lady looked at her in astonishment. "I do not attend, madam. I am always waiting in her room should Miss de Bourgh need me."

Elizabeth thought this uncommonly rude of both Lady Catherine and Miss de Bourgh to exclude Mrs Jenkinson. She wondered how long it had been since that lady had been allowed to have an opinion of her own.

She tried again with Miss de Bourgh. "What are some of the masquerade habits that Lady Catherine has available to borrow? I should like to wear something more than a domino mask."

Miss de Bourgh muttered something to Mrs Jenkinson that sounded like, "You answer her."

"I could not say all that Lady Catherine has. A few queens and Cleopatras. Milkmaids, flower girls, even cats or other animals are always in attendance. Some men dress as women, and women as men. The gentlemen often appear as a variety of sailors, emperors, religious persons. Some wear only fancy dress and a domino hood and mask, but her ladyship prefers everyone dress. No one is admitted but in character."

"Are you talking of the masked ball, Mrs Jenkinson?" Lady Catherine called.

Mrs Jenkinson said that she was answering Miss Bennet's questions, and her ladyship demanded Miss Bennet to come near to hear more. This forced Elizabeth to sit next to Sir Hugh; she noticed Darcy following her with his eyes as he played with Colonel Fitzwilliam.

"You will be grateful to know, Miss Bennet, that I have invited several gentlemen who I think will do well for a woman such as you."

"I beg your pardon, madam?" *Does she mean to furnish me with a few dance partners?*

"As you know, your situation is more distressed than it was when you were last here. There will be some gentlemen in attendance of suitable views and pretensions for both their rank in life and for your situation."

Did Lady Catherine intend to find her a husband? Elizabeth doubted what she was hearing, and why she was hearing it at all. *What unaccountable officiousness!*

"I believe that I have the perfect person," she continued with the confidence of one not used to having her opinions controverted. "Captain Veck is a half-pay officer; his father had been in trade, but I still intend to introduce you. He is unconnected with rank, but respectable."

She was entirely speechless, which was just as well since Lady Catherine was not done.

"If he does not suit, for he is nearly fifty, perhaps you might like Mr Tackleton, Sir Warden's cousin who is visiting from Sussex. He is a clergyman, a young man of an amiable disposition; a little too much of the rattle, perhaps, but a year or two will rectify that. He is in other respects an eligible man, for someone like you."

Elizabeth saw directly that Lady Catherine now expected some sign of gratitude.

"That is kind of you." This was said chiefly for the sake of saying something that would not injure the Collinses. "But at one-and-twenty I have not given up hope to find a husband on my own, one who loves me and who has admirable qualities."

She absolutely refused to look at Darcy, and at the same time she felt Sir Hugh's attention. Sir Hugh was an acute, unembarrassed observer to her discomfort.

Lady Catherine seemed quite astonished. "I am no stranger to the particulars of your youngest sister's infamous elopement." Elizabeth felt her stomach drop. "I know it all: that the young man's marrying her was a patched-up business at the expense of your father and uncle. Someone of my rank and influence will be necessary to introduce a woman of inferior birth with such connexions as yours to a respectable man who might be willing to have you."

The only sound in the room was the sound of a hand of cards being tossed onto the table. She was in a fidget as she realised that everyone knew of the elopement, even Sir Hugh. Darcy knew the full truth, and he had likely told his cousin. The gossiping Lucases had told the Collinses about Lydia, so of course everyone at Rosings knew it all.

And she means to feel her own importance by being of service to one she feels so wholly beneath her by finding me some manner of man willing to look past my family's flaws!

"I would be uneasy about your prospects, if I were you," Lady Catherine went on, unaware of the anger her comments were creating. "Thankfully, for your sake, you have my notice. My acquaintance is numerous, after all." She turned to Sir Hugh. "Do you remember Mr Redlaw? He is near your age. Mr Redlaw will also be at the masquerade. They say he is a little addicted to the dice and the bottle, but he has enough to marry on and is from an excellent family. His connexions would all be glad to see him settled down with a genteel sort of girl."

She felt her cheeks glow with not only shame, but anger. "You have excessively disconcerted me, Lady Catherine," she began.

"I do not blame you for being concerned that your sister and that man's living together before the marriage took place should be so

generally known," she said ungraciously, "but if you are to make a match, you cannot hide such things from a prospective suitor. The man's family will eventually learn of it, no doubt."

Sir Hugh now gave her a shrewd glance and said, "How generous that her ladyship wishes to be of use to you." Although his tone was even, Elizabeth suspected he was throwing a sarcasm at her.

"And, you must know," Lady Catherine went on, "I can only help you because your sister and that young man were eventually married. Thank goodness your uncle and father had a sufficient fortune to varnish over the loss of your sister's reputation."

She heard Darcy draw his chair a little toward them. "Lady Catherine, you must not say such things," he said, in a tone that was not quite composed. "There is no need, no cause for you to distress Miss Bennet."

She finally looked at Darcy, and saw his positively pained expression. Darcy *truly* knew it all, and he did not slight her or judge her for her connexions' behaviour or choices. Their eyes met, and she gave the smallest possible shake of her head. Whatever may be the failings of Lady Catherine, as her nephew, it was his duty not to resent them, and in his interest not to see them.

I dare not have Lady Catherine learn of what Darcy did for Lydia.

"You need not show such concern, Darcy," his aunt said. "Miss Bennet must instinctively feel her lower place, given the lost reputation of her family." Elizabeth looked at Lady Catherine with astonishment, but she did not appear to notice. "Your apprehensions must increase," she said, turning to her, "but my amiable condescension will go a long way in securing you a husband."

Although she was vexed to the soul, insulted and mortified, she was absolutely forced to affect admiration. For Charlotte's peace of mind, for Darcy's relationship with his aunt, and for her own dignity she would not treat Lady Catherine with all the disdain she deserved.

"However unlikely it is that I will find a husband at your masked ball," Elizabeth said, feeling herself colour and going to great effort not to move her eyes from the aunt to the nephew, "it is certainly not my inclination to make an ill use of your condescension."

She then took leave of them all, pleading she ought to rest before what would be a late night.

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"YOU MUST CHOOSE SOMETHING," cried Fitzwilliam, as he closed one trunk and opened another. "You cannot wear only that domino mask. Everyone shall know that the tall, silent man standing in a stupid manner is you unless you are dressed in character."

Darcy turned over the black satin mask that would cover his eyes and the space between them. He was not in the mood to consider the ball. Lady Catherine had insulted Elizabeth. He had seen her sufferings and been unable to relieve them.

I need to command a half an hour of her time.

Anything poignant or heartfelt would be utterly out of place at a ball with several hundred guests all in character. It was possible that amid so many revelling strangers in masquerade dress that he might not even recognise her. Still, he was not without hope that during the ball or perhaps after everyone unmasked he would have the chance to ask Elizabeth if her feelings for him had changed.

"I decided to change my masquerade habit; you were right that I am too often Caesar and all shall know me," Fitzwilliam prattled on. "I already said to Miss Bennet I would dress as a Roman. Do you want to wear it instead?"

Does Elizabeth now see enough goodness in me to think she could be happy with me?

"Darcy! I said find a masquerade habit," Fitzwilliam said. "I have chosen, but you must choose before Lady Catherine comes in and tells you what to wear."

He sighed and opened another trunk. "She may suggest something, but I draw the line at dressing as a woman."

"It is a masquerade! It is all for fun. You could dress as a woman. Some of the ladies will be in trousers and the men in gowns. Do not be fastidious."

"You mistake me. I dare not dress as a woman because you wore the dress and short sleeves of a peasant girl three years ago and your arms are prettier than mine. My vanity cannot suffer the comparison."

Fitzwilliam tossed a monk's robe at him, saying, "This shall cover your arms!" and Darcy set it aside with a laugh.

Sir Hugh then entered, and rummaged through a trunk with a practised air of indifference. The humour and conviviality slowly seeped from the room.

Darcy paid him no notice, but after some silence Sir Hugh eventually asked, "What do you know about Miss Bennet's peculiar manner this evening?"

"How do you mean?"

"She was affected by Lady Catherine's hints about getting a husband and her family's now-scandalous reputation. She hid it well—her ladyship would not notice—but Miss Bennet was both angry and self-conscious." He pulled out a blue domino—a hood and short cloak worn with a mask—but set it aside with a frown. "I can see why she would be made angry, but not why she was embarrassed, since everyone in the room knew the sad story."

“Perhaps she was only self-conscious about being angry,” Fitzwilliam said after a long pause.

Sir Hugh ignored him and continued to stare at Darcy with a penetrating gaze. He tried to dismiss the whole matter. “It is sometimes the effect of being self-conscious to then feel angry, and act embarrassed for feeling so, and the cause and effect are reciprocal,” Darcy said. “Perhaps you may be right that she was angry to hear mention of it, but perhaps Fitzwilliam is right that it was only because Miss Bennet knew she looked embarrassed.”

Sir Hugh gave him a sharp look and said, “I hate qualifying arguments. ‘In this case.’ ‘Perhaps.’ ‘One thing leads to another.’ ‘Sometimes.’ That is not like you to be indecisive.”

“What do you want me to say?” Darcy asked, losing his patience.

“I want to know what *you* think Miss Bennet’s motives are. You are the one amongst us who might know her best. Your friend married her sister. I want to comprehend her behaviour, so tell me what you think of it.”

“Not everyone is a dissected puzzle for you to put together,” said Fitzwilliam, rolling his eyes. “Miss Bennet is entirely innocent of any secret motives. She is a rational creature, after all. Sensible enough to be embarrassed by Lady Catherine, and sensible enough not to speak against her in anger.”

Sir Hugh stopped glaring at Darcy to look at Fitzwilliam. “Nothing can be more diametrically opposed than rationality and women. It is partly why I cannot sketch this girl’s character.” He turned back to Darcy. “You, tiresome bore as you are, are a sensible man and not a delicate creature unable to be logical. Why did she react that way?”

“You think women are all delicate creatures who do not know their own minds?” Darcy avoided giving an answer. Elizabeth’s mortified behaviour was because he had once offered to be her husband, and Lady Catherine was now offering to find her another—and not a good one at that—and because Lydia eloped with a worthless man who Darcy paid to marry her. “How can you be so ridiculous?”

“It is not ridiculous. They are delicate. Women need our reason for their conduct, and our strength for their protection.”

“Such a concern with female delicacy weakens women, by talking of the delicacy of their sex and such, and not allowing them to act as the rational beings they are.”

“Are you a champion for the rights of women, Miss Wollstonecraft?” Sir Hugh mocked him.

“I am simply an advocate for their happiness.”

“You should advocate for their delicacy. That will best conduce their happiness.”

“I am sure that conduces to the misery of many women.”

“You speak from experience? Do you make many women miserable?”

Darcy wished he had not been teasing when he suggested leaving snowballs in the house for such a time as now. He rolled his eyes and resumed his search for his masquerade dress. Sir Hugh walked away and sat in silence.

“She did not look at you,” Sir Hugh said a few minutes later, as though this was a complete thought. Fitzwilliam asked what he was about, but Sir Hugh ignored him, likely knowing that this rudeness would infuriate Fitzwilliam.

“Why when a woman likes a man does she not tell him so honestly?” Sir Hugh asked himself, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands behind his head. “Because she knows that such a step would disgust the object of her affections.”

As unconventional as it was, Darcy would not at all mind if Elizabeth boldly said she admired him. *In fact, by this point, if she threw herself into my arms in a public place, I would return the embrace with greater ardour.*

Sir Hugh narrowed his eyes in thought. “She is not one of your masculine rational women, after all, but one who wants to be a proper helpmeet to a man, and that is why she wanted to appear delicate and proper in your eyes.”

“Are you talking of Miss Bennet?” Darcy asked, in as measured a tone as he could.

“I have it! She has set her cap at you!” He then laughed. “Oh, that is pitiful. Her sister’s marriage to your friend and one polite call, and she has lost what little use of her senses she had.”

Darcy was too stunned to give an answer, and Fitzwilliam filled the silence. “What makes you think Miss Bennet admires Darcy?”

As usual, Sir Hugh ignored Fitzwilliam. He rose from his chair to stare into Darcy’s face, still with a smirk on his lips. “When Lady Catherine was talking of husbands, all Miss Bennet did while she sat angry and mortified was pointedly *not* look at you. It was not just the sister’s patched-up marriage that mortified her; it was your aunt knowing it, and her finding her a husband.” He laughed again, a cold piteous sound. “But the husband she wants”—he pointed—“is you.”

“Do you,” said Darcy slowly, “do you truly think so?”

“You won’t marry her,” he said, shaking his head. “I pity the foolish girl. And you tried to convince me she was as rational as a man! Miss Bennet has fifty pounds to her name. You could marry Anne on the day of your choosing and have Rosings and thirty-thousand pounds.”

Fitzwilliam now sat in a chair with a hand across his mouth. “So, Sir Hugh, you are certain Darcy would never marry Miss Bennet? His

friend has wed her sister, after all.”

“As I said before,” he said to Darcy, pointedly ignoring Fitzwilliam, “you have no liveliness, but you are clever. You are too dull and too duty-bound to go against your family and friends, but you also have the intelligence to not marry a poor woman with bad connexions. There is no unalloyed passion here.”

Darcy continued to stare in silence while Fitzwilliam said, behind his hand, his eyes bright, “You do not think Darcy could love Miss Bennet?”

“You might enjoy being liked, be amiable enough since your friend and her sister will often bring you together. Maybe if you drink enough, you might kiss her under a mistletoe bough, but Fitzwilliam Darcy is not going to propose marriage to Miss Bennet.”

“You must be prodigiously proud of your quickness of comprehension,” Darcy said with a neutral countenance.

Sir Hugh touched his forehead in salute. “See you at the masquerade.” He gave a self-satisfied smile and left.

“When you announce your engagement to Miss Bennet, can I be the one to inform Sir Hugh?” Fitzwilliam asked with an expectant grin. “If you could secure her tonight so I can tell him in person, I would enjoy that.”

It was indelicate to speak of such things before he confessed his love and affection to Elizabeth. He still had to ascertain the lady’s feelings and ask her. Still, he hated Sir Hugh, and Fitzwilliam looked so hopeful that Darcy gave a little nod.

“Come now, Darcy,” he cried, clapping his hands once and jumping to his feet, “it is after eight and the guests will be here at nine. The servants have hung mistletoe all through the ballroom, and many a maiden’s cheeks and lips will be red if I have my say. Pick a masquerade dress and be done with it.”

Darcy considered this for a moment, and thought of how he had not been lucky enough to stand near to Elizabeth and a mistletoe bough. “Pass me the Roman garb.”

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THE WHOLE HOUSE was now in a commotion from Lady Catherine’s various arrangements and decorations, for almost every apartment was to be opened for the ball. Elizabeth was in a room with trunks and boxes with masquerade habits and masks for those ladies who did not have their own. If she did not choose, she would be forced to pass the evening in only a mask that covered her eyes and the gown she wore to dinner.

I would rather be in character and make it difficult for Lady Catherine

to find me and introduce me to the motley assortment of men she thinks might humble themselves to settle for me.

Her ladyship's impertinent confidence at finding her an awful husband and at her involvement even being necessary or wanted was beyond the pale. What would Lady Catherine have said if Elizabeth had told her the husband she wanted was playing cribbage across the room?

I shall have to pin all of my hopes on finding Darcy at the ball and showing him that I admire and love him.

Elizabeth opened a box and pulled out a boy's clothes; she then considered a milkmaid's garb, and a roundhead's helmet, and other shirts and gowns and feathers and veils, but nothing seemed to suit.

Lady Catherine then entered, and Elizabeth was proud of herself for not cringing.

"Is Mrs Jenkinson not here?" she asked in an angry tone. "She is to see to Anne's masquerade dress. My guests are beginning to arrive. I expect there to be so many carriages it takes hours for everyone to enter. Anne will rest above stairs until later in the evening, but Mrs Jenkinson must have her dressed now."

"She was briefly here, but Miss de Bourgh called her back to move her footstool."

"I shall have Anne wear the character of a country housemaid." Lady Catherine opened a wardrobe and selected an open gown, a pink petticoat, and a muslin apron and a little cap. "She shall appear to her advantage; Anne has a fine figure."

Miss de Bourgh was sickly, a small, plain woman who gave everyone frigid looks rather than speak to them, but whatever Lady Catherine said was spoken in so authoritative a tone as marked her self-assurance and self-importance. Elizabeth only nodded.

"Have you not chosen?" her ladyship asked while striding toward a trunk in a corner. "You will wear this. It shall help the men I have chosen for you see past your sister's reputation and show yourself in a more virtuous light."

Lady Catherine set before her a loose black gown with long wide sleeves, a cincture with a cross, a white wimple, and a black veil.

"A nun!" cried Elizabeth. Nothing was beneath this lady's attention that could furnish her with an occasion of dictating to others.

"Here is a full mask, although you may choose to only wear a domino mask. You are tolerably pretty, after all. When Mrs Jenkinson returns, show her the housemaid dress for Anne. Collect your habit and dress swiftly; you shall not need to dress your hair, of course, so I need not send a servant to you. I shall send for you later when it is convenient for me to introduce you to the gentlemen I have selected."

Her ladyship left, and Elizabeth grew angry, then wretched, and

then downright indignant. She had suffered so many insults from this woman. She refused to wear the nun's habit to satisfy Lady Catherine's opinion that she ought to parade as a virtuous prude in order to gain an old man or a rattle or a drunk as a husband.

The door opened again, and Elizabeth was about to speak her mind when she saw it was Mrs Jenkinson and not Lady Catherine.

"Her ladyship said Miss de Bourgh's masquerade dress was here?" she asked in a harried manner, looking at the strewn piles of accoutrements.

Elizabeth did not hesitate, and said in a pleasant tone and with a neutral countenance, "Her ladyship would like Miss de Bourgh to dress as a nun."

She pointed to the clothes and full mask before her, and Mrs Jenkinson curtsied and swiftly took the collection from the room. Elizabeth was unwilling to gratify Lady Catherine any longer.

I am not certain that was wise, but hopefully I will survive this evening without regretting it.

Elizabeth made another attempt to find a masquerade habit, sorting through this and that until she found a white Grecian gown without sleeves. She then looked at the assortment of feathers and the metal roundhead helmet, and found her character for the evening.

I will need some wisdom and courage if I am to avoid Lady Catherine's anger and show Darcy that I sincerely love him.

Chapter 6

When she was satisfied with her cinched peplum gown and newly-plumed helmet, and tied her satin domino mask across her eyes, Elizabeth ventured down the stairs. To her amazement, there were at least three hundred masks within Rosings. Lady Catherine's event seemed to involve most of the county. Soon after nine o'clock every public room was occupied, and the crowd of masks were dispersed through Rosings's various apartments.

The servants had been ordered to fix coloured lamps in some of the rooms, and Elizabeth was forced to admire the beautiful effect of Lady Catherine's contrivance. Evergreen leaves still decked every surface, there was a surfeit of candles hanging in every room and even in the corridors, and mistletoe boughs twined with ribbons were brought into the ballroom.

If I cannot demonstrate to Darcy that my feelings for him have changed, that I want him to assure me of his continued affection, perhaps he might be swayed to kiss Wisdom if she stands alluringly under the mistletoe.

Dominoes of no character were scattered throughout, but most were in character along with their masks. Some were half masks like hers, only covering the eyes and the space between them, but others wore painted masks that covered their entire face. The men were schoolmasters, chimney sweepers, sailors; and the ladies shepherdesses, orange girls, and haymakers. Elizabeth walked from one room to the other in a daze of noise and confusion as she looked for Darcy.

"Do you know me?" cried a man dressed as the devil who approached her suddenly. He wore black from head to foot save for red horns that issued from his forehead. His face was completely covered so that only his eyes were visible. In his hand he held a wand the colour of fire. "All do, of course, but few will admit to it," he added, waving his wand for emphasis.

It took her a moment to find her voice and remember the courage

of her character. "I do not; besides, I am too wise to be well-acquainted with wicked spirits."

"Are you certain? Are you not one of the Miss Webbs? Shall you unmask, and let me be certain of it?"

Elizabeth was determined not to unmask too early. She shook her head and moved away.

After being familiarised to the abruptness with which the masks approached her and the freedom with which they addressed her, the first confusion of her situation subsided. Everyone was free to speak at a masquerade, and when masks addressed one another, they employed the use of phrases such as "I know you" or "Do you know me?", and the mystery was to stay in place until midnight.

There were false mustachios on the lips of women, long wigs on the heads of men. A cough proceeded from an old woman who was a man in disguise. All about was noise and confusion, the press and jostle of crowds moving from room to room, the shrieks and laughter of hundreds of people.

A masquerade is not the best calculated of all possible places for considering deeply.

However, there was something romantic throughout this little adventure, which pleased her. It could be great fun to search for Darcy among the masks. Her hopes for the evening were to avoid Lady Catherine, to not meet any of the men she wanted to introduce to her, and to flirt with Darcy enough to show him that she was blazing with love for him.

Elizabeth made her way through several of the small apartments where champagne flowed freely, but could not find him. Thinking that she might check the ballroom, she was on her way to the stairs when a man suddenly dropped to his feet before her.

"Fair goddess, I humbly prostrate at your feet. Beauteous above the most beautiful, please allow your knight to pledge his fealty to the queen of beauty."

Elizabeth held back a laugh. "Tell me who you are, knight."

"I am called Don Quixote de la Mancha," he drawled in a false voice, "knight errant and adventurer, and captive to the peerless and beauteous Dulcinea del Toboso."

The Don Quixote at her feet was dressed according to Cervantes: his helmet a basin, his shield a dish, and his lance an old sword fastened to a cane. His mask, which covered his entire face, depicted a haggard face.

"Rise, sir knight," she said, disguising her voice. "You mistake me, I am not the goddess of beauty, that is my sister Aphrodite, but I will guide your battles."

He thanked her, bowed, and then charged away to drop at the feet

of another woman to swear his allegiance.

It was another quarter hour of "Who are you?" and "I know you!" with much finger-pointing and squeaking voices and staying in character before she arrived in the ballroom. *At this rate I shall never find Darcy tonight let alone speak with him.*

Across the room she caught a glimpse of a man in a toga leaving through the other door. A woman dressed as an Egyptian stopped him and appeared to demand a kiss, for the man in the toga complied with a salute to her cheek and was then allowed to pass. Elizabeth wondered if it was Colonel Fitzwilliam, who said he would dress as Caesar, but there were over one hundred people in between them and she could not be certain.

A quadrille was then called, and she was asked to dance by a chimney sweep covered in real soot, and then a stout pirate in a full mask with a cutlass at his side asked her for another. They danced in silence, and Elizabeth enjoyed the tumultuous cheer of the evening and admired the other masks. Some were plain and black and left the nose on view, others were coloured or embellished, some were full masks with expressive faces painted on them.

"You have made a mistake with your masquerade dress," the pirate said before long. "You are not wise if you think you can get Darcy."

She was greatly surprised and for a moment could not speak. This pirate, with a sling over his shoulders with a two brace of pistols hanging in holsters and a brightly coloured calico coat of a hundred years past, had a self-satisfied air. She took a closer look at the cold eyes and broad figure of her partner.

"I know you," she said.

"Do you? I am Calico Jack and have just returned from the Bahamas. Must I show you my jolly roger to prove it? Mine has a skull and crossed swords."

The dance parted them, and Elizabeth used the time to calm her mind. Sir Hugh could not know of her hopes for Darcy, and Darcy certainly would not have told him of their history, so full of contrarieties and secrets. *Whether he still has any deep affection for me or not, he would not speak of me to Sir Hugh.*

"Since you are a recently returned pirate, you could know nothing of the tender feelings of any mask in this room," she answered in a measured tone.

He looked her up and down, and his disapproval was plain even from behind his mask. "Such a strange dress for a woman who has made an unwise, irrational choice—a hope, really," he amended. "Your expectations will come to nothing."

"You know nothing of me or the likelihood of my hopes and wishes coming true. I know you," she said again, "and yes, you *are* a

pirate because you are here to raid all that Lady Catherine has that is not left to Miss de Bourgh."

"I have a fair chance of succeeding to all that Lady Catherine has to give that would not be left to Anne," he said evenly. "I need not resort to piracy to achieve *my* end. I have reasonable hopes, but *your* method for securing a fortune is a foolish one."

Sir Hugh seemed particularly amused that her character was the embodiment of rational thought. They crossed hands one final time, and once the courtesies were done, she strode away from him with all the dignity the goddess of war and reason could muster. Sadly, the merciless pirate followed.

"Darcy will not marry you, not when he could have Anne, thirty-thousand pounds, and Rosings for his second son. Not to mention the approbation of good society and his friends."

"I suppose you think you are doing me a service, Calico Jack, by giving me this advice? Or are you a ruthless pirate who aims to wound me?"

He scoffed as though the conversation, the entire masquerade, everything, was a tiresome bore. "I aim to pass the time, goddess. If you or Darcy or anyone is distressed while I occupy myself at Rosings and pay court to Lady Catherine, it is no concern of mine."

She looked at him incredulously. "You would sow discord to alleviate the tedium you feel while suffering the company at Rosings?"

The pirate removed his hat and bowed with a flourish. "I shall tell Lady Catherine I was fortunate enough to dance with you. I know she wants to introduce you to her friends. You shall have better luck securing one of them."

He is cruel and conceited, intelligent but heartless. Sir Hugh wanted to antagonise those around him; he had no love for Darcy, and he had none for him. Sir Hugh seemed a cold man, with a practised air that could only satisfy someone like Lady Catherine. He had no concern for who rose or fell in one's esteem.

Shaking her head, she stormed across the ballroom toward the other door, telling herself it was all an act to stay in character, when she stopped short at the sight of Lady Catherine. She had not seen her in her masquerade dress. Her ladyship wore the slimmest of domino masks, scarcely covering her eyes, and one's attention was immediately drawn to her golden red wig. Lady Catherine was dressed as Queen Elizabeth, with a large ruff, and all the costume of that time.

Elizabeth was determined not to open her lips, lest her voice should betray her as her ladyship passed near to take a seat at the head of the ballroom as though she was a queen. Her supercilious manner toward those who spoke to her, her expectation of their deference, was not merely the character of a reigning monarch.

How could I ever have thought her like her nephew?

Though a crowd was gathering around their regal hostess, Elizabeth saw from the back that a man now approached Lady Catherine whose toga, laurels, and lyre announced Apollo. She saw that, amusingly, Apollo had replaced his bay leaf crown with mistletoe and red ribbons. He was soon lost in the throng and, not wishing to be noticed for not wearing the dress of a nun, she slipped from the room to evade Lady Catherine.

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ROSINGS WAS CROWDED TO EXCESS. It had been three years since Darcy was at Rosings over the Christmas holiday, but every New Year's Eve masquerade was the same. The heated atmosphere of each packed apartment, people feeling the effects of too much wine and heady with the anonymity of the masks, someone breaking dishes or upsetting a bottle of champagne. Everyone would claim it was a charming evening and shower Lady Catherine with lavish praise and the event would be repeated next year.

The turbulent gaiety taxes my patience.

In his quest to find Elizabeth, Darcy checked the dining room where someone was dared to jump over the table. The jumper took great steps back and collided with Darcy without so much as an apology. It was in vain that some people remonstrated upon the danger of it. The jumper was determined—or drunk—and first taking a run, he attempted the leap.

The consequence was such as might be expected. The confusion occasioned was alarming, and dangerous to those near who suffered from the splinters of glass; and the jumper himself crashed amid crystal, papier mâché, lamps, and oil.

The novelty of the scene, however, joined to the general air of merriment and diffused throughout the company. Darcy shook his head and continued on through another room. In every one he expected to find Elizabeth, and so far he had been disappointed. After over an hour, he was afraid he would miss her altogether. Just as he was resolving to either stay in one room and wait for her to appear or resume a second circuit of every public room, he realised he had not seen his aunt.

I must pay my respects to her majesty in court.

Colonel Fitzwilliam, still chasing windmills, told him he could find her ladyship in the ballroom. On his way there, he was forced—by the rule of staying in character and by the frivolity of the season—to offer kisses to the cheeks of three women before he entered.

There was a familiar stout pirate near to her ladyship, and after

narrowly eyeing one another, they touched their heads with the barest of civilities.

“And does Sir Hugh often visit you and Miss de Bourgh?” a shepherdess he thought was Lady Marley asked.

Lady Catherine looked at Darcy, who bowed as he joined the group surrounding and lauding their hostess. “Not nearly as much as my Fitzwilliam nephews, who have the goodness to spend all of the Christmas holiday at Rosings. I daresay all of their leisure time not in field sport will be spent with me. I am particularly attached to them, and know them to be so much attached to me. Darcy’s attachment to Rosings in particular steadily increases.”

“My attachment to you is as constant as it has always been,” Darcy said quickly. “I could not imagine how it could increase.”

Her allusion to his marrying Anne was not unexpected, but it was unlike Lady Catherine to speak of it in public. *Perhaps the fawning attention of so many friends emboldened her.* He had, after all, hinted since his parents’ deaths that he was not inclined to marry Anne no matter what his aunt and his mother had hoped for.

“Should you wish for my presence more often,” said Sir Hugh, forcing Lady Catherine to look at him, “you need only ask. I like nothing better than waiting on you at Rosings.”

Darcy wished his character required him to wear a complete face mask so he need not hide his disbelief. Sir Hugh was only here because he wished to be principally remembered in her will since none of his de Bourgh relations had thought him or his father worthy of any money.

Lady Marley complimented his gallantry while Darcy turned away to hide his disgusted expression. Lady Catherine said, “Yes, Sir Hugh is attentive to me; he was just saying how well he admired my holiday decorations.”

Lady Catherine did not notice Sir Hugh for Sir Lewis’s or for Anne’s sake, or for the sake of familial connexions or because she intended to leave him any money. *She does it because she likes to be admired.*

“Captain,” her ladyship called to an older man who was leering at the bosom of a young woman wearing an old-fashioned, long-waisted gown as he reached for her pocket-holes. If he was mortified at being caught, he did not show it, and merely turned with a complacent smile to attend to her ladyship.

“Darcy, Captain Veck wished to make Miss Bennet’s acquaintance. I desire you to bring her here directly.”

The tension he had been carrying in his shoulders lessened. *I would like nothing more this evening than to find Elizabeth.* “I have not seen her tonight and do not know what she is wearing.”

“I commanded her to don a nun’s habit.”

His heart beat hopefully at learning Elizabeth's character. Sir Hugh then measured him with his eye as a person whom he longed to attack.

"I saw a nun sitting in the breakfast parlour," said Sir Hugh slowly. Darcy begged to take his leave. As he passed, Sir Hugh leant toward his ear and added, "Be sure to let her down gently, but best to get it over with quickly."

Darcy could make no sense of his behaviour, but what mattered now was he knew how Elizabeth was dressed and where to find her.

"Find Miss Bennet," Lady Catherine was saying, "and then you must dance with Anne. She is in the dress of a maid in a pink petticoat."

"I shall have the heartfelt pleasure of it," he answered, knowing which task he was truly referring to.

Darcy once again made his way through the laughing, riotous throng, suffering to kiss another woman's cheek who, by standing near to him, claimed that she was under the mistletoe and demanded a kiss. He had thought adding the mistletoe to his masquerade dress could only help or, at least, make Elizabeth laugh, but these interruptions made him more impatient to confess his devotion to Elizabeth. What he hoped for was a long, ardent kiss, and her lips were the only ones he intended to taste this evening.

There were perhaps a dozen people in the breakfast room, crowded around the table, eating and talking. A nun in a painted face mask was seated alone against the wall, staring into the room in what appeared to be complete disinterest.

Why is she sitting in the corner of a small room at a ball? What had happened to distress her that she would be here alone? She hardly appeared to be Elizabeth, with her discouraged manner and religious clothes. Elizabeth was of middling height and slender, but the nun's garb and her slumped posture made her appear thin and small.

Darcy could not wait another moment. He strode across the room to sit next to her and, before she could move or speak, he seized her hand and pressed his lips fervently on it. "You cannot know for how long I have wanted to do that. You are the only woman who has ever had the least influence over me, and I—"

"My mother will be pleased you came to the point, but this warmth and energy is not necessary."

"Anne!" he cried, dropping her hand. Now that he was near and heard her voice, this drooping figure in a habit was obviously not Elizabeth.

"I shall marry you, but I dislike you Darcy, so do not kiss me."

"What?" he asked dumbly.

"It is not a sudden fancy; I always thought you disagreeable."

Darcy kept his countenance and a civil silence. "Any professions of affection are disgusting to me, but I shall marry you if you have settled the point in your mind."

"I have *not* settled it," he answered quickly. "In fact, let us consider this conversation as my staying too much in character and feeling the effect of too much drink."

Anne shrugged, completely indifferent that a moment ago she might have been engaged and now was not.

"Anne," he said quietly, although no one was paying them any mind. "I do not wish to marry you, and you clearly do not have any love for me."

"What has love to do with marriage?"

He ignored that. "I am sorry to pain you, but you could not make me happy. No matter what our mothers might have wished, and no matter—" He might have said no matter what Elizabeth thought of him. "Come what will, I will not marry you."

Anne shrugged again, and said something or other about him drinking in moderation for the rest of the evening. She then demanded a servant carrying a tray to find Mrs Jenkinson and bring her at once. Darcy considered saying more by way of apology for dashing her hopes of a union between them, but then thought better of it and simply left her.

Darcy was making a second sweep of all of the public rooms when he realised what Sir Hugh had said before he parted from Lady Catherine. *He knew Elizabeth was not dressed as a nun.* Whether he knew Anne had worn the dress of a consecrated person instead he was not certain, but Sir Hugh knew Elizabeth had not worn what Lady Catherine had asked her to.

Under the guise of resolving his tedium, what other selfish mischief would that scheming man undertake before the evening was over?

Chapter 7

There was someone in a white domino and a man's fancy dress, but Elizabeth was certain it was a woman, but the harlequin crossing the room was of indeterminate sex. A man habited as an Italian friar asked "Do you know me? I know you!", but Elizabeth answered in a low and faint voice that he was wrong and walked away.

What had started as a romantic or amusing search through the masked crowd for her heart's desire had now become a tedious frustration. As more time passed without seeing him, Elizabeth felt anew every wish of Darcy's constancy, and every fear that he would not propose again. Darcy was too generous, and perhaps a little too proud, to oppress a woman with what he thought were vain wishes.

I rejected him after all and, unlike Mr Collins, he took me at my word.

"Do you know me?" the Man of La Mancha approached again and asked her in a feigned voice. She shook her head, but he then asked her in his normal voice.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam!" she cried, smiling. "How do you like the masquerade ball?"

"Masquerades are merry, spirited things, particularly when the occasion is to celebrate the Christmas holiday and the new year."

"I caught a glimpse of a man in a toga two hours ago, but I had thought *that* was you."

"I changed my mind at the last; am I not a good Don Quixote?"

"You have stuck close to the character. I did not know it was you when you swore your allegiance to me and my cause hours ago."

"I would keep up my character the whole of the evening until we all unmask together, but Lady Catherine has asked to see you. I see no way for you to avoid it, I am afraid. Darcy was supposed to bring you to her, but perhaps he never found you amid all of these masks and hundreds of people. I myself have not seen him in an hour."

"I had been hoping"—her voice caught—"hoping to dance with him, but I have not seen him either. I do not suppose you will ruin the masquerade by telling me how he is dressed," she added hopefully.

“Darcy is usually determined not to unmask or make himself known to anybody during the whole evening.” She sighed at his not taking her hint. “Hardly any different than a typical ball, come to think on it.”

They made their way back to the ballroom where Lady Catherine was still holding court. She noticed the Apollo she had previously thought was Colonel Fitzwilliam striding from the room, leaving his lyre behind. There was something to that tilt of the head, the set of the shoulders that caught her attention, but they had now arrived before Lady Catherine.

She saw that Sir Hugh was among the group near to her ladyship, and Colonel Fitzwilliam immediately bowed and left. Like a true great lady, Lady Catherine talked and talked only of her own concerns for some time before acknowledging her. She finally grew inquisitive and asked who she was.

“I am the goddess of war and wisdom, madam.”

“Miss Bennet! I did not know you. I directed you to dress as a nun. I am not accustomed to having my suggestions rejected by someone of no importance in the world.”

She felt her colour rise, and took a calming breath. “I did not think your kind suggestion suited me. It was against my inclination to dress in that manner, but I thank you for all the notice you have bestowed upon me.” For Darcy’s sake, she would be civil. After all, she was not without hope that this holiday season would end with Darcy presenting her to Lady Catherine as her future niece.

For a moment, Elizabeth was sure that Lady Catherine was determined not to be satisfied, but she then said, “I must concede that your masquerade dress is done well. Perhaps drawing notice to your more alluring qualities will better suit the purpose of seeing you appropriately settled rather than making you appear innocent and virtuous.”

Rather than speak out of turn, Elizabeth only nodded. *Let us hope she does not soon realise I had Anne dressed as a nun instead.*

“Captain Veck,” she called to a man, as old as Elizabeth’s father, who had been enjoying standing under some mistletoe with a young girl with a showy figure. Lady Catherine then introduced them, adding, “Miss Bennet is a genteel girl, although decided in her opinions. It is a shame she has no fortune and comes from such a family, but I thought you might not object to such things since she is young and pretty, and the daughter of a gentleman.”

The man in question was too drunk to share an opinion. He asked her to dance, she claimed she was too fatigued, and he then gave his notice to a different very young lady who was now standing in the same place as the one previous. Lady Catherine took hold of the

conversation of those around her with the ease of one who felt that any notice from her was an honour.

Perhaps Darcy would come to speak with Lady Catherine in the course of the evening. *I would suffer Sir Hugh and Lady Catherine if it gave me the chance to show Darcy that he has secured my affections as well as my esteem.*

Stationing himself close by her, Sir Hugh now seemed to mean to detach her as much as possible from the rest of the party. Within a moment he contrived to stand on her other side. In her attempt to inch away, she was now beneath a mistletoe bough. Sir Hugh noticed her glance upward and, although she could not see it, she was certain he wore a smirk beneath his mask.

"I am fortunate that my mask covers my lips, and I unmask for no one. You have nothing to fear from me on that score," Sir Hugh said. "I only wanted to say that I see you standing on your toes, turning your neck, scanning the crowd. Perhaps Darcy took himself to bed early. You are not as wise as you think, Athena, if you believe you will win the purse of Lady Catherine's nephew."

I have more interest in winning his heart. Darcy had created sensations that her heart had never known before, but she would not confess that to Sir Hugh before she had a chance to tell Darcy. "I am amazed that you come to Rosings even when you find everything about it tiresome and must cause mischief to amuse yourself."

"My aunt has many thousands a year to bequeath. I want to be principally remembered in her will; I am a poor man for my rank in society. We are not so different, you and I. You have a desire to marry a wealthy commoner who pays his bills, after all. He is more appealing than a baronet without any money," he said plainly.

Elizabeth was utterly appalled. "You fail to consider the understanding, the wishes, the temperament, the affections—"

"I am not interested in your claims of acute sensibility," he interrupted sharply. "I wish to secure for myself a share of Lady Catherine's property, and you wish to secure for yourself a wealthy man of noble lineage and respectability."

"Only a wealthy one, of course; I suppose any one would do," she said sarcastically.

"Certainly. Why else would a chatty thing like you want to marry a dull man like him?"

"You know nothing of me at all if you think *that* was the point I was trying to make!" she cried. "I think you would use any stratagems and contrivances to obtain your end."

"You may class my behaviour as such, if you choose," he said, looking across the room with an air of apathy. "Perhaps I shall tell her ladyship of your designs on Darcy."

She gasped. "You are not going to make such a claim to Lady Catherine!"

"I shall amuse myself however I can while at Rosings. Besides, if her ladyship is enraged on that score, she might then persuade Darcy to finally make his proposals to Anne." She could not see his face behind his mask, but his eyes were alight. "He shall hate being attacked, naturally, and be very vexed by her insistence and interference," he said in a pleased tone. "But we all know he will offer her his hand eventually. If Anne marries Darcy and that matter is settled as she likes, Lady Catherine might be prepared to make a final will for the rest of the Fitzwilliam property at her disposal."

Elizabeth knew she had no hope of dissuading him from such a scheme, and quit the room with the hope that Lady Catherine might find the entire idea to be a falsehood. *If she does not, I do not want to be near when Sir Hugh tells her.*

*

THERE WAS a medley of characters in every room Darcy entered. A woman garbed as a vestal virgin was coquetting with several men. A school master was accusing someone in a domino as a dunce and commanding him, or her, to stand in the corner. He passed through another room near to a man dressed as a lady during the reign of Queen Anne. He sat with his face patched and painted, with his hoops and ruffles and high powdered hair, fanning himself.

I have had no luck finding Elizabeth wandering from room to room amongst hundreds of people and constantly shifting crowds.

"Is that a boy, or a girl, think you?" was the question from many mouths as some people passed. The identity and gender of many guests remained a puzzle.

While he crossed the hall, Athena, dressed in a white peplum gown with a plumed helmet, was moving in warlike majesty. The goddess of wisdom and courage was clearly a woman. Her gown was cinched with a girdle about the waist and her plaited brown hair passed her shoulders from beneath her helmet. As she came nearer and he got a better look at her through the drunken and lively crowd, Darcy's heart caught in his throat.

He had seen a similar manner in the way a young woman with blousy hair and muddy petticoats strode into Netherfield's breakfast parlour.

"Do I know you?" he called after her. His question slowed but did not stop her determined progress in the other direction.

"Yes, I sprang fully formed from my father Zeus's head," she said, not looking at him. "And, no you do not know me."

Darcy reached out to touch her hand, and he shivered at the contact although she pulled away with impatience. "I know you have wit enough for a Pallas."

He had not disguised his voice, and she finally stopped to look at him. Not even the mask shadowing her eyes could dim the brightness that suddenly filled them. "I know you," she said with a wide smile.

"Of course you do," he said with a trembling voice and a wish that there were not dozens of people pressing past them, calling and shrieking and drinking with abandon. "I have been searching for you all evening."

"Me too." She took a long look at him, smiling softly as she did. "You have replaced your bay laurel with mistletoe. The red ribbons amongst them give you a very festive air."

"I thought rather than a symbol of victory and honour I would wear a symbol of the holiday." *And of love.*

"You have had to salute many guests, I see; there is scarcely a white berry left."

He wondered if she was jealous, although she appeared amused. "Apollo had to suffer kissing a number of fair cheeks but, I assure you, there is only one—"

"Miss Bennet!"

Sir Hugh came into the hall, with Colonel Fitzwilliam close behind him. "Her ladyship wishes to speak with you directly. She is in the small summer breakfast parlour."

Darcy watched Miss Bennet's face redden around her domino mask as she turned a hateful look on to Sir Hugh. Sir Hugh wore a full mask, but his temperament appeared at ease.

"No, I have nothing at all to say to her!"

This reply surprised Darcy, and drew the attention of the revellers near to them. Elizabeth was unfailingly patient with Lady Catherine. In fact, Elizabeth typically received all of her interference with an enviable forbearance of civility.

"You had best speak with her sooner rather than later," said Sir Hugh. "You would not wish for her to come speak to you about private matters in front of all of these people."

Elizabeth turned from Sir Hugh and looked at Darcy for a long moment before giving a resigned sigh. Something had occurred to ruffle her civil manner to an uncommon degree, some disappointment, some vexation, and Lady Catherine was at the heart of it.

"Miss Bennet, what has happened?" he asked her quietly. "What can I do?"

Her cheeks were now pale, and her manner greatly agitated. "Nothing that I can ask of you," she said, trying to smile. "I must see what can be done to placate her ladyship." She curtsied and, with a

parting glare at Sir Hugh, left them.

"Why was she so distressed?" Darcy asked, not caring for the smug look in Sir Hugh's eye.

"What refined delicacy you have to care for the feelings of some woman. I told her ladyship that Miss Bennet is resolved to have her nephew Darcy."

"You told Lady Catherine that I want to marry Miss Bennet!" He was astonished that Sir Hugh would say such a thing.

"No," he cried as though he thought him stupid. "I told her that Miss Bennet would accept your hand, should you be foolish enough to offer it. You and I know that her wanting to marry you does not make it likely to happen, but Lady Catherine would rant and storm at the idea." Sir Hugh's cold eyes brightened for a moment at this thought.

Fitzwilliam took off his Don Quixote mask, his features showing complete puzzlement. "Miss Bennet would never confess such a thing to *you*."

"She did not have to," he replied sharply. Turning to Darcy he then said, "Simply because you are blind to her interest does not mean that a man of sense cannot see what is plain."

"I was not blind to her esteem, her respect. I..." He looked at Fitzwilliam, who only shrugged. What could he say: that all evening he had wanted five minutes alone with Elizabeth to ask her if her feelings for him had changed?

Sir Hugh unmasked, and then took a step nearer. "Why are you so —" He turned to look at Fitzwilliam. "No, no he could not!"

Fitzwilliam nodded.

"Wait, Darcy *wants* to marry Miss Bennet?" Sir Hugh was absolutely incredulous. "That makes no sense at all. She has no extraordinary talents, no miraculous virtues. A little beauty"—he shrugged—"but she has no money!"

"It seems that," said Fitzwilliam, in a gleeful tone, "by her good sense and merit and wit and liveliness she has, to all appearance, secured a strong hold in Darcy's regard."

"No. No, it is not rational and it goes against his best interest. I cannot believe it!"

"Sir Hugh, you are witnessing the coruscations of love before your very eyes," Fitzwilliam said with a laugh.

Sir Hugh turned from Fitzwilliam to ask Darcy, "Did your interest only originate in the persuasion of her partiality for you?"

"Good God!" Darcy did not know what answer to make, short of striking Sir Hugh in the face.

"It is horrible to me to think how it will sink you in the general opinion, to foresee the sneers it would prompt at your expense when everyone learns your portion-less bride is the sister of a woman who

eloped,” Sir Hugh said. “The mortification and disdain of your uncle Lord Fitzwilliam and Lady Catherine will be great.”

“And yet, all of that is nothing to me. The only thing that matters is *her*, because I—”

“I do not care,” Sir Hugh cut him off, his attention turned inward. “If you marry elsewhere, and poorly, Lady Catherine will want her daughter wed to someone, and soon. She will lose out on uniting the Fitzwilliam fortunes and that will wound her. If *I* marry Anne, she at least becomes Lady de Bourgh, and if Lady Catherine cannot secure your money for her tedious daughter, then she might settle for getting her a title, and I can have the de Bourgh fortune after all.”

He left them immediately, and Fitzwilliam and Darcy shared a disgusted look. “It is appalling how rapidly that man finds something to serve his own self-interest,” Darcy said.

“Do you think he will be less cunning and selfish if he ends up with a fortune and Rosings by marrying Anne?” Fitzwilliam asked.

“No. His disposition is set, and nothing will overcome his selfish nature and his compulsion to cause mischief when he finds people tiresome.” Sir Hugh’s object was always to captivate some woman with a much better fortune than his own, and to secure for himself a mention in Lady Catherine’s will. He could now do both at once.

“I dislike him,” Fitzwilliam muttered, putting his mask back on. “I always have. He likes a quarrel, and cares naught for who he might injure in his quest for money and amusement.”

“I too dislike him violently, but we had best learn to tolerate him if he ends up marrying Anne.”

“You had best station yourself near to the small parlour,” his cousin said, going back to join the masks, “because Miss B—”

Elizabeth came hurrying from the room at the end of the corridor and stalked through the crowd, looking like Athena out of one of Homer’s poems as she ran up the stairs, looking at and speaking to no one. Before he could follow her, Lady Catherine, with all the severity and regality of the queen she was dressed as, came from the room and stared at him.

Darcy raised his eyes to the stairs and was about to ascend them when his aunt called for him to join her in the parlour. He decided it was best to manage Lady Catherine first and have no interruptions later when he pursued Elizabeth.

His aunt was normally communicative from a natural love of being heard, so it surprised him to see her standing red-faced in silent indignation. It was almost comical to see her dressed as Queen Elizabeth, with puffy sleeves, large ruff, and full skirt, and looking so discomposited.

“Madam, what has happened?”

“She showed me no gratitude,” she cried, “no gratitude at all for my attentions! I insisted on being satisfied, but she dared to say that I was not entitled to know her concerns.”

You are not so entitled. “Did you call me here on some matter with which I can help you?”

“She would not answer me when I asked if she was resolved to have you,” she said, her mouth twisting in bitterness, “and *that* in itself is an answer, a most disrespectful answer!”

He stayed a stern and silent observer to her ranting because thus far she had said nothing to which he could give a reply.

“She said that while you might approve of my involvement in your affairs—of course you would, I am your nearest relation—she said that I had no right to concern myself in hers. She would neither answer nor promise!”

Did Lady Catherine accuse her of wanting to marry me, and did Elizabeth refuse to deny it?

His aunt then turned to him with an indignant glare and with the colour of anger. “If Miss Bennet thinks that she can speak to me in that way in my own house, when she is my guest, when I have tried to get her a husband despite her poverty and her sister’s scandalous reputation, then she has now learnt how sadly mistaken she was.”

“Madam,” he said in a tone of surprise, “what have you done?”

“Such pretension! Still, I shall not run the risk that, amid Christmas gambols, her arts and allurements make you forget what you owe to yourself and to all your family. You need not fear, my dear Darcy,” she said in a calmer tone, “she is gone from Rosings and you are perfectly safe.”

Darcy looked at her with unaffected astonishment. “You sent her home *now*?”

“That ungrateful girl of inferior birth,” she muttered, shaking her head.

“But, Miss Bennet is not even engaged to me, and you cast her out in the middle of the night?”

“Her own heart, her own conscience must know she deserves it.”

He had to speak with Elizabeth. It would take time for the carriage to be readied and for Elizabeth to change and pack. He would have time to apologise on behalf of his aunt and do whatever was necessary to set the matter to rights and, hopefully, ask her to marry him.

Lady Catherine seemed to settle herself. “Well, the matter is resolved, and you must have no further connexion with that woman. She is gone by now.”

“How could she be gone from Rosings already? The horses could not even be harnessed by now.”

“You have mistaken my character if you believe I will importune

my coachman and horses for such a woman.”

Darcy was shocked and grieved, and could not say a word. Without taking leave, he strode from the room and passed through the hall, his eyes looking every which way for Elizabeth.

“Darcy!” Fitzwilliam called, running up to him. “I saw a flash of a black cloak and brown hair hurry down the stairs, push her way through the crowd, and go out the front door.”

He nodded his thanks. There was a man dressed as a coachman coming from the drawing room and Darcy demanded his cloak. Something in his look and manner compelled the man to hand it over, and Darcy ran out into the night.

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“No common attentions will you receive! You are to go, and go tonight, and no carriage will be called for you.”

Elizabeth had been speechless as Lady Catherine ordered her from the house, and told her that her trunk would be returned tomorrow, that she might walk back through the park on her own, and to not borrow a lantern from anyone in the stable-yard. Elizabeth did not even take the time to change from her masquerade dress. She removed her helmet and mask, threw on her cloak, and charged from the house. The indignity with which she was treated, striking at that instant on her mind with peculiar force as she felt the cold air, made her for a short time sensible only of resentment.

She turned me from the house at midnight, in the snow!

No reason could justify it, and no apology that could atone for the rudeness, nay, the insolence of Lady Catherine’s behaviour at the mere rumour that she would accept Darcy’s hand should he offer it. What would Charlotte say when she appeared at her door at such an hour? *And what will Mr Collins say when he learns why I was cast out?*

And worse, every hope, every expectation in regard to Darcy was now suspended, at least, and who could say for how long? Who could say when they might meet again or what his feelings would be when they did?

“Elizabeth!”

Darcy was running down the stairs and across the lawn. That he had called her by her name did not go unnoticed. Did he do it out of alarm, from feeling, or was it simply absence of mind?

“I just learnt that you had been driven out, without the considerations even of decent civility,” he said breathlessly when he caught up to her some distance from the house. “I am livid, of course, mortified and insulted by my aunt’s behaviour. I am sorry, exceedingly sorry that you were treated this way. There is no excuse

for it."

Does he know why I was cast out? Darcy still needed to sleep under Lady Catherine's roof, still had to show her at least the appearance of familial respect. Elizabeth's anger fell away, and a resignation and weariness replaced it. "You need not apologise for your aunt. Nothing in what she said or did is a reflection on you. For the sake of your relationship with her, you ought to go back inside before she—"

"I hardly care about what Lady Catherine thinks."

Darcy was looking at her intently, and standing very near to her; she wondered if he was about to say more. He still maintained a little reserve, but he was more familiar and communicative than he had been when she first met him.

And he still has no idea how I feel. All evening she had been in no humour for conversation with anyone but himself; but now, even dressed as the goddess of courage, rather than confess her feelings, she asked, "Why does Sir Hugh act in such a way?"

His expression darkened. "To see what would happen, to see what manner of reaction he gets in response. Let us not speak of Sir Hugh or Lady Catherine, for they are not worth our breath. Come and wait by the stables where it is warmer, and I will wake my coachman."

She shook her head. "No, it is foolish to wake him. It is only half a mile, although perhaps you might defy your aunt and borrow a lantern for me?"

"You are not walking alone through the park!" he cried, taking hold of her hand as though she might run off on a sprint.

"I am very brave, you know." Elizabeth tried to laugh, but the feel of Darcy's hand clasping hers held all of her attention. Her swelling heart needed relief. She needed to know if his affections and wishes were unchanged.

"Yes, I remember you saying that your courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate you, but you still ought not to wander in the dark alone." His attention fell to the Grecian gown he could see through her open cloak. "I admire your masquerade dress; courage and wisdom suit you well," he said. He still held a light grip on her hand. "My masquerade dress was simply convenient."

"No, Apollo suits you too," she said quickly. "He is complex. He is loyalty, reason, and moderation personified, a blend of physical superiority and moral virtue." She blushed, and realised Darcy might be affronted by her speaking plainly. "The masquerade is soon over," she said to change the subject. "You can unmask."

"I had forgotten I was wearing it." Darcy let go of her hand and reached behind his head to remove the mask and dropped it in the snow.

On seeing all of his handsome face, the brightness of his eyes and

their deep expression fixed on her, Elizabeth felt anew all of the hope that he still loved her. She wished she had the courage to speak first, to confess that ever since they met at Pemberley she had been hoping he would ask for her hand again.

Darcy looked at her with outward calm, but she wondered if he felt a tumult similar to hers. The seconds stretched out, feeling like hours. "Well, now that we are unmasked," she said playfully to cover her anxiety, "I suppose this is the part of the evening when I must ask by what name shall I call you?"

"Call me yours."

Elizabeth's heart beat wildly. Relief and hope and raw elation coursed through her.

"Have I any reason to hope to hear my name on your lips? Have I any reason to believe that I could be yours?"

She worked to even draw a breath. All she managed was a nod.

"There does not exist your equal in all the world, Elizabeth," he said softly, taking hold of her hand again. "All evening, indeed, ever since I learnt you would be here for the Christmas holiday, I wondered if I could ever be admired and loved by you."

He expressed in his voice and manner an affection and uncertainty that had not been present when he last made a similar speech. Elizabeth fought back the happy tears that were about to fall.

"Happen what will," he went on, "my love for you is constant, but one word from you will—"

"My heart has been yours for months," she cried. "I hoped all evening for the chance to show you that my feelings for you had changed." She gripped his hand tighter, and he placed it over his heart and held it there. "I love you."

He gave her a delighted look. Darcy tilted his head and lowered his mouth to her lips before her heart could take another beat. His mouth moved gently over hers as he brought an arm around her waist. She stroked a hand over his jaw while opening herself more to his kiss, and kissed him back with all the love and relief of finally having her hopes realised.

Darcy pulled away and rested his forehead against hers. "Elizabeth, I love you and I am devotedly yours."

The sound of her full name on his lips struck her and she shivered.

"Are you cold, my dearest Elizabeth?" he asked, pulling her a little closer.

Everyone else called her Lizzy or Eliza; it made her want to hear him whisper her full name against her neck before kissing her there. *There will be time enough for that because he loves me after all.* For now, she wanted to know if hearing his own name made him feel the same strengthening intimacy.

“No, Fitzwilliam, I am absolutely perfect.”

His eyes darkened, and he took a quick breath before pressing a soft kiss to her forehead, her cheek, and finally one more lingering kiss to her lips. With her hands inside his cloak against his chest, she could feel the fast beat of his heart.

“Why did you not return to Hertfordshire with Bingley if you still loved me? I had been hoping you might come back.”

Still with one arm wrapped around her waist, his other had moved up to her hair. His fingers were now sliding down her neck to the exposed skin above the collar of her cloak. She trembled beneath this slightest of touches.

“You know that after April I hoped to obtain your forgiveness,” he said softly, “to lessen your ill opinion of me. I feared that after what happened with Lydia and Mr Wickham that I had no right to any other wishes. I promise you that those hopes introduced themselves in about half an hour after I had seen you at Pemberley.”

She pressed a quick, hard kiss against his lips. He let out a muffled sound of surprise before he kissed her back in what quickly became a soul-thrilling embrace. *He has been devoted to me, all this time.* Too soon, the ardour of his kisses slowed, and he bestowed a few single, warm kisses to her lips and mouth before stopping.

“Did I ever ask you to marry me?” he asked with a smile. “I have had such a pleasant time kissing you that I cannot remember if I offered myself to you again.”

“I am not certain that you did, but perhaps it was implied. You should ask just to make certain the matter is perfectly clear. But, I hope you know that I am joyfully, ardently, devotedly yours.”

Darcy’s hands rested beneath her cloak on her hips, and he leaned his face to hers. Elizabeth brought her arms around his neck. He looked like he was about to kiss her again, so she leant back to ask, “Were you going to ask me a question while we stand here in the snow?”

He pretended to be affronted at not being able to kiss her. “Let me assure you that the rest of my life is devoted to you and your happiness, if you will end my suffering and agree to be my wife.”

“Yes, I am yours.” She tilted her head to look at the sky; the snow was falling heavier. “I am glad that you did not let my starting a snowball fight change your mind about marrying me.”

He laughed. “Your cheerful, lively disposition is one of your qualities that I most admire. I also admire your person,” he said, pressing a kiss to her temple. “And I delight in your conversation”—he kissed her cheek—“I respect your brilliant talents.” He left a lingering kiss on her lips.

It was a reassurance to counteract all the anxiety of the previous

months, all the anxiety of the evening, to hear the real, genuine warmth and tenderness of heart that Darcy expressed.

After pulling him into a brief embrace, she removed the mistletoe and its red ribbons from his head. "You do not need this any longer because I have decided to be a jealous intended."

"I was not sure if you would need an excuse to let me kiss you."

"So many other ladies drew near to Apollo to receive a kiss, you scarcely had any berries left by the time you found me amid all the guests. Do I need the mistletoe bough now?"

Darcy took it from her and pulled off every remaining white berry, looking deep into her eyes as he plucked off each and tossed them to the ground, and then all the greenery with it. "Every remaining kiss I have to give is yours."

He kissed her eagerly, their lips meeting in a sweet, ardent kiss.

"Fitzwilliam"—she was a little breathless when they stopped—"what o'clock is it by you? Shall Lady Catherine notice that you are missing?"

He reached for a pocket watch that, of course, was not on his masquerade dress. After laughing he said, "It was nearly twelve when I left the house, so it must be past midnight. I am sure they have all unmasked and gone to supper. Happy New Year, my dearest Elizabeth."

"I wish you a prosperous new year, Fitzwilliam. And now that I am yours, I have every reason to hope that 1813 shall be a very happy year." Darcy took hold of one of her hands and fervently pressed it to his lips, giving her a look that held all the promise of their bright future together. Then he looked up and noticed the snow falling around them.

"It is cold, and looks and feels like we shall have more snow. Since I do not want to lose another snowball fight, shall I take you to the parsonage? If your uncle and aunt will receive you tomorrow, my carriage can bring you to town at the earliest possible hour. I will ride along with the carriage, and I can write to your father as soon as we get there."

It was in everyone's best interest if they left Lady Catherine to her inevitable disappointment as soon as possible. But the idea of parting from Darcy now, even for a few hours to sleep and then leave for London tomorrow together, was heart-rending. *I have only just been secure of his affections.*

"There is hardly enough snow to whiten the ground; only a few flakes are falling. Can we stay here a little longer?" she asked heavily, with a long gaze at his lips.

Darcy brought his hands inside her cloak to rest on her hips again, and gently pulled her in close. "If we stay out here in the snow for

another quarter hour," he said in a low voice, "talking will not content me."

Elizabeth brought her hands to rest on either side of his face, stroking his jaw gently. "I always delight in your conversation, but I suppose I have heard enough professions of love for the present. If you were to imprint a few more fervent and affectionate kisses to my lips, I would not mind at all."

THE END

Coming Soon

An Affectionate Heart

Are love and affection enough to overcome the pain of grief and anger?

In the spring of 1812, Elizabeth and Lydia are the only Bennet daughters still unmarried after the death of their father. Elizabeth's health and spirits worsen as she moves among relations as an unwanted, dependent sister. She returns to Mary and Mr Collins at Longbourn to learn that the neighbourhood gossip centres on the reclusive Mr Darcy.

Darcy and his sister live an isolated life in a small rented lodge near Netherfield after the events at Ramsgate. As Georgiana's health is failing, Darcy has his own regrets to bear. He tries to keep them secluded, but a young woman arrives who is determined to befriend his lonely, ill sister.

When Elizabeth receives disastrous news, she makes a daring plan to find happiness for herself while she still can. Misunderstandings and secrets abound for them both but in the end, Darcy and Elizabeth will find greater strength together than they ever had apart.

COMING IN 2022

*An
Affectionate
Heart*

Lydia went on about dress and officers while encouraged by her mother, and Elizabeth had to pretend she was interested. Mary interrupted to say that such things had no charms for her, and her husband interrupted as often as possible to say nothing of note. The conversation then moved on to every article of news that happened since October within a five-mile radius of Longbourn House.

Gossip fatigued Elizabeth as it never did before when Longbourn had been her proper home. She felt too much a stranger in the neighbourhood to care about what houses were let and who lost their servant and who had another baby. Still, Elizabeth tried to do as she ought and show enough interest to satisfy her mother.

“Is Netherfield House let yet? It has been empty two years.”

“No, we will never have a proper family settled there!” her mother cried. “The only newcomer to the neighbourhood is that man who rents the lodge at Netherfield. I have only laid eyes on him a few times outside of church, but we all know a dishonourable man when we see one.”

“How do you know he is dishonourable if you have never spoken to him?”

“Your mother is entirely right,” said Mr Collins. “He has a disreputable character. I cannot neglect my duty as head of this household, and I therefore insist you to draw back from any acquaintance with this man.”

Mr Collins loved nothing more than to remind her that he owned Longbourn and she was dependent upon him. Ignoring him, she said to her mother, “You cannot leave me in suspense. What has the man done, Mamma?”

“Sir William Lucas called on him, and I understand he returned the call as a matter of course, but he hosts no parties and goes nowhere! He says nothing of where he is from or who his people are. He attended three evening parties in six months, but other than that, we only ever see him at church where he speaks to no one!”

Elizabeth laughed. “How dare he!”

“Mr Collins called on him, and when he returned the call, he declined my—Mary’s invitation to dine!”

Mary gave her mother a disapproving look. “That is the least of his defects. His true faults are of a moral nature. It is universally acknowledged that he keeps a woman at the lodge with him as his mistress. Sir William always tries to draw him out, but it is shocking, and this family is fortunate that we do not dine with him.”

“I heartily agree, my dear Mary,” said her husband “Although I did not see the lady when I called, the gentleman told me the woman who resides with him is his sister. Far be it from me to assume anything ungentlemanly about a man who claims to be a fellow Christian, but

as she is not seen in public, not even at church, nor does she do the compliments of his table, we must assume she is his mistress and he is ashamed of the sinful nature of their relationship, and therefore keeps her hidden.”

Mrs Bennet leaned forward and dropped her voice. “Sir William said he heard from his housekeeper, whose sister helps with the washing at the Lodge once a week, that she is an invalid, and that is why she is not seen in the neighbourhood.”

“Then it is possible this man is truly overseeing the care of a sick sister.”

Elizabeth’s four companions drew back and shook their heads at her apparent ignorance and stupidity. Her mother’s eyes lit up as she shared more salacious news. “Mr Jones is known to call frequently at Netherfield Lodge.”

“The apothecary visiting is a natural consequence of tending to an invalid,” Elizabeth said.

“His partner in the apothecary shop in Meryton has a cousin whose son is a footman of the Goulding’s at Haye Park, and he told the coachman who told Hill that the woman there has been seen embracing him! And she is very young. He is living with a woman who has lost her virtue!”

“And worse, he rents the gatehouse!” Lydia rolled her eyes. “They say he only has a few servants and does not keep a carriage. I doubt he has five hundred a year.”

Elizabeth attempted to share a look with anyone at the table about this ridiculousness, but of course, in this she was entirely alone. She managed to catch Mary’s attention and said, “It sounds to me that you have little information about this man, yet you are determined to think the worst of him based on his unsocial nature and rumours spread by servants.”

“There is countless talk of a scandal that surrounds the inhabitants of Netherfield’s lodge,” Mary intoned, “and, of course, we know there is a woman he hides there. You will do well to stay far away from Mr Darcy.”

About the Author

Heather Moll is an avid reader of mysteries and biographies with a masters in information science. She found Jane Austen later than she should have and made up for lost time by devouring her letters and unpublished works, joining JASNA, and spending too much time researching the Regency era. She is the author of *Nine Ladies*, *His Choice of a Wife*, and *Two More Days at Netherfield*. She lives with her husband and son, and struggles to balance all of the important things, like whether or not to buy groceries or stay home and write.

Connect with her on social media or on her [blog](#), and subscribe to her [newsletter](#) for updates and to receive the unpublished epilogue to *Two More Days at Netherfield*.



Also by Heather Moll

Nine Ladies

How can Darcy and Elizabeth overcome 200 years of differences in this time-travel love story?

His Choice of a Wife

When a man's honor is at stake, what is he willing to risk for the woman he loves?

Two More Days at Netherfield

How would spending a few extra days in each other's company affect the relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy?

The Gentlemen Are Detained

"Will Elizabeth welcome the renewal of our acquaintance or will she draw back from me?"